DRAG QUEENS AND COWBOYS: CULTIVATING QUEER COUNTRY MUSIC THROUGH POSTMODERN CAMP

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green
State University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

August 2022

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores the potential of a queer country music space; specifically, how it exists, who exists within it, and how it may expand further. Country music has historically been associated with concepts of authenticity while also being known for its use and celebration of excessively gaudy and glamorized aesthetics. I explain how, within country music, the use of a performance persona combines these seemingly contradictory characteristics, rendering them simultaneously true. This is relevant as I argue that these personas can be interpreted as postmodern expressions of camp and can be considered as a method of existing within country music in a way that respects an explicitly queer origin and existence. Chapter one provides necessary background information on queerness in country music's history, also clarifying how exactly I define camp as a concept. Chapter two is a case study of Dolly Parton's persona, how she's constructed it and what implications it holds for a queer country music space as a gender-based performance that can be read as an example of postmodern camp. This chapter also elaborates on Parton's similarities with drag queens, referencing popular social media celebrity Trixie Mattel to elaborate on their shared queer perspective of gender. Chapter three is a case study of a more recent addition to country music, Orville Peck, and his practice of disidentification of Old West and cowboy aesthetics as an act of postmodern camp. My final conclusion considers potential of the Internet to facilitate growth of an explicitly queer country space, one which does not have to be accepted by the mainstream but can exist on its own as a subgenre.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to thank my thesis chair, Dr. Becca Cragin and thesis committee members, Dr. Jeremy Wallach and Dr. Kristen Rudisill for their patience and assistance throughout the completion of this thesis. I am especially grateful to my committee for taking time from their summer vacations to review my final round of revisions. I would also like to give my thanks to the administrative staff and my colleagues at Bowling Green State University's School of Cultural and Critical Studies for their encouragement and support. Finally, I must also thank my parents and sister for their continued attempts to understand my work despite its niche topic, and their toleration of my long-winded explanations and many tangents.

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INTRODUCTION

In the 50th anniversary publication of *Country Music: USA* in 2018, country music scholar Bill Malone updated his seminal work to include the potential for the genre's expansion. In his new material, Malone recognized some of the noticeable changes in the genre, especially the changing roles of the previous "gatekeepers," and how the development of the internet and the music industry has impacted the way music distribution works. Malone also briefly discussed Beyoncé's interlude to country music with her performance of "Daddy Lessons," featuring the Chicks at the 2016 Country Music Association awards.[1] He commented on how the discussion over whether or not her song could be considered country was ultimately futile, as "Daddy Lessons" did in fact fit within country music's sonic history.

But Malone's final conclusion was that country music is still as homogenous as it has been since its inception, with a focus on white and (mostly) male voices.[2] Through this noteworthy publication that is widely used in scholarly work on country music, there was a noticeable lack of certain topics. Arguably, his consideration of nonwhite voices was not extensive, but it was there; effort was given to identifying the black/African American roots of many country music traditions and how those contributions have had changing impacts. There was also a fair amount of material dedicated to the female stars and important figures in country music history; Dolly Parton's name was not as present as I would have assumed, but that may be a personal opinion. Most notably, and significantly, was the almost entire lack of mention for queer artists and songs in the country music repertoire.

After reading all 769 pages, I used the extensive index (53 pages long) to look for "queer," "gay," "lesbian," and "LGBT." There was only one entry to register, an endnote for the

[1] The Chicks were formerly known as the Dixie Chicks.
[2] Malone & Laird, *Country Music: USA*, 562.

last chapter. Malone wrote, "I was influenced here by the idea I first encountered in Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*. (2014)"[3] I was surprised that there was absolutely no mention of the queer pioneers of country music, even for the point where he cited Hubbs' significant work. I suppose if I was looking for queer country music history, I could have looked at Hubbs' more specific work, whose title references its contents quite clearly. This is not a reprimand or criticism of any kind, but an observation. In the four years since the 50th anniversary edition of *Country Music: USA* was published, the queer presence in country music has surfaced in an increasingly large spotlight several times. I expected to find mention of it in this already extensive volume, but I am also viewing the subject from a different place in time, after several queer country artists have come to light. And with the recent social media trend of "Y'allternative" (portmanteau of y'all and alternative) culture, it is not surprising that a more "progressive" country audience is developing.[4]

With this audience, the questions that Malone posed at the end of *Country Music: USA* gain a new facet, as country music scholars have started considering over the last decade how country music's historical reputation as conservative is actively changing and can be increasingly measured and studied to an academically acceptable length. I find my own "gap-in-the-literature" within this space, inspired by my personal experience with the genre, as I have belonged to this not-insignificant portion of the country music audience for as long as I've been listening to music. I also happen to have grown up in the South, and my longing for queer country music stems from a desire to see something like my experience reflected back at me in the musical tradition I am familiar with and hold in favor. In my exploration of how queer country music can exist and why it manifests the way it does, I also consider the implications of

[3] Malone & Laird, *Country Music*, 590.
[4] Jackson, "Y'Allternative TikTokers Are a Little Bit Country, Little Bit Rock n Roll."

a queered space communicating authenticity and validation in its existence. To expand on my thesis, a brief query into the country music historical context is necessary.

Country Music's History

According to Bill Malone, country music had historically maintained an apolitical appearance and it was not until the Cold War that a reputation for conservative values started to develop in earnest. Malone also notes that "country songs, then, while frequently expressing compassion, have rarely been liberal in any conventionally defined sense."[5] Even with its previously more apolitical stance, it still had not been generally associated with progressive values or politicians. In particular, it was during the Vietnam War era that country music became politicized, primarily by politicians. Presidents Nixon and Reagan were significant fans of country music, and both recognized the potential audience appeal to more "traditional" values via associations with the genre. President Nixon started this process by conflating "country music's characteristic themes of family, religious faith, and patriotism with the views of his so-called 'silent majority.'"[6] It wasn't until President Reagan fully cemented a relationship between country music's characteristic nostalgia for the home with right-wing politics and "family values." Since this process started, the public perception and the reality of country music became increasingly partisan, with an emphasis on patriotic support. The Iraq War era of the early 2000s following 9/11 can be credited for continuing this reputation into the 21st century and even further solidifying it. Several events happened during the few years immediately following 9/11 that contributed to this. First being the slew of excessively patriotic songs that explicitly addressed a far-right sentiment of American military aggression; songs released by artists like Toby Keith's "Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American)" set a stage for the

[5] Malone & Laird, *Country Music: USA,* 351.
[6] Malone & Laird, *Country Music: USA,* 553.

rest of the American public to maintain that association between overtly political and conservatively political positions with the country music genre. Another incident that's been noted as impacting the general American public was the immediate and obvious industry backlash that the Chicks (then named the Dixie Chicks) faced after band member Natalie Maines' critiqued President George W. Bush quite publicly. Event like these were used by the general public, who were not familiar with or fans of country music, to justify an anti-country music sentiment based on an assumption that any and all country music would be reflective of this reactionary moment in the genre's history.

Another historically important element to country music has been class, specifically the working class and their class-specific concerns. One of those concerns has centered around what it means to be a real, down-to-earth, and "authentic" person. Often, authenticity was defined by essentialist standards, that only the cognoscenti would be able to identify who could be *genuinely* authentic. In a 1998 interview for The Observer, Dolly Parton spoke about authenticity as she sees it in country music, describing it as "just ordinary stories of ordinary people, and if you're real good at it, you can tell 'em in an extraordinary way. Everybody feels exactly the same." Her description is accurate, as authenticity in country music has revolved around a perceived shared class experience. But, as country fans and scholars have started to notice more frequently, many of the currently most popular mainstream country artists are starting to manufacture the shared experience; songs like Blake Shelton's "Minimum Wage " are received poorly on a large scale.[7] There is an opportunity unfolding for newer artists to create space for themselves, as the desire for "really authentic" musicians becomes louder. This requires challenging how a country has been contained to a specific image by internal and external identification.

[7] Brooks, "Blake Shelton's New 'Minimum Wage' Draws Complaints."

Country music's history with subgenres is relevant to its relationship with class as well. In particular, acknowledging the differentiation and similarities between country, folk, and Americana is necessary. All three intersect heavily, both in terms of its musical qualities and its audience. In his book, *Rednecks and Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music*, Chris Willman suggests that country has always had coexisting "redneck" and "hippie" groups, but this narrative has been overwritten by mainstream country being dominated by the conservative rhetoric courtesy of Presidents Nixon, Reagan, and Bush. Willman suggests that country as a genre can be characterized as maintaining a dialogue between the mainstream and alternative. And this dialogue is echoed by the political divide between subgenres; in particular, how "outsider genres like alternative country and Americana" are representative of more progressive beliefs.[8]

Despite country's complicated history with class, politics, and authenticity, it has also placed a historical emphasis on performance. Specifically, it has had "performance codes that allow for irony and camp," for elaborate personas and celebrations of the excessively gaudy.[9] I imply that the two characteristics contradict because they do, to an extent; the working-class sentiments and construction of authenticity revolve around an essentialist definition of genuineness and being "real," of having "good" values and being a "morally sound" person. I put these characteristics in quotations because the definitions for what it means to be morally good or real are tenuous at best and subject to interpretation on an individual level. If being authentic is the ultimate goal, how does that enmesh with the simultaneous allowance and praise for a constructed glamor and "camp-y" costumes in bright colors and excessive sequins? This is one of the questions I consider in my exploration of what an "authentic" queer country music space looks like and how, within the boundaries of what's already been allowed in country music

[8] Willman, *Rednecks and Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music*, 69.
[9] Whiteley, "Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity, and Subjectivity," 17.

history, it is possible to be both authentic and entirely constructed. The construction in question can manifest in different ways, but I am considering how a concept like camp can be interpreted as a method for building authenticity in a way that respects a simultaneously queer and country origin. To explain further, a definition of camp and queer is necessary.

Defining Camp

Christopher Isherwood's 1954 novel, *The World in Evening*, is generally credited as one of, if not, the first attempt to explain and define camp. He differentiated between high and low camp with completely subjective examples; but these are noted as being one of the first to introduce camp into the academic sphere.[10] Finding a set and agreed-upon definition of camp has proven to be more difficult than most would assume. Susan Sontag's pioneering essay, "Notes on Camp," is widely recognized as jumpstarting a wider academic conversation about camp, but this conversation also includes frequent criticism of her conceptualization of camp as an esoteric sensibility and logic of taste.[11] This sensibility is artifice for style's sake, not just prioritizing content over meaning but effectively dismissing a meaning altogether.

Condensing her relatively short essay to be even shorter, Sontag's fifty-eight points can be summarized by three elements: artificiality, aestheticism, and a form of enjoyment.[12] The aesthetics and enjoyment of camp are derived from its artificial nature, specifically the artifice of material items; Sontag notes that "Clothes, furniture, all the elements of visual décor, for instance, make up a large part of Camp."[13] Sontag's camp is about a transfiguration of "the serious into the frivolous," as an individual judges something as camp-y because it is attempting to be serious and fails in its extravagance. She does acknowledge and writes about camp

[10] Booth, "Campe-Toi!," 15.
[11] Taylor, *Playing it Queer: Popular Music, Identity, and Queer World-Making*, 70.
[12] Leibetseder*, Queer Track*s: *Subversive Strategies in Rock and Pop Music*.
[13] Sontag, "Notes on Camp."

performances, but because a lack of intentionality is so important to her definition, a performance can be deemed camp after it is over or by the audience as it is happening but not by the performer before they start.

I will highlight several different scholars' work on camp to provide a wider overview of how camp is conceptualized in academia. In Moe Meyer's impactful edited volume, *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, scholar Chuck Kleinhans uses Sontag's essay to explain that camp is a "strategy of reading that sees the world in terms of aestheticization and style."[14] For Kleinhans, camp is an ironic and parodic appreciation of an extravagant form that is out of proportion to its content, especially when that content is banal or trivial. In "Camp and the Gay Sensibility," Jack Babuscio argues similar sentiment and explains that there are four basic features of camp: irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humor. Camp irony is "any highly incongruous contrast between an individual or thing and its context or association. The most common of incongruous elements is that of masculine/feminine."[15] Another similar definition is from music studies scholar Stan Hawkins, who posits that camp is when one takes something ordinary and makes it ironic through exaggeration and an intense self-defensiveness. He believes that camp is "intended as an allusion" as the meaning should be subtle and completely up to the reader or watcher to make their own connection. Foremost, Hawkins posits that camp is about making fun of oneself to prove a point.[16]

Defining Queer:

I start with Eve Sedgwick's definition of queer in her 1993 book, *Tendencies*. She says that one of the things queer *could* refer to is "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps,

[14] Kleinhans, "Taking out the Trash: Camp and the Politics of Parody," 185.
[15] Babuscio, "The Cinema of Camp," 118.
[16] Hawkins, *Queerness in Pop Music: Aesthetics, Gender Norms, and Temporality,* 146.

dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically."[17] The emphasis on could is relevant because Sedgwick makes it clear that queer, the term and concept, can signify a large scope of definitions. David Halperin's formulation is even looser as he conceives queer theory (theory based on queer the concept) as an all-inclusive discipline that might designate almost anything: "Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it refers. It is an identity without an essence."[18]The conundrum of queer theory and the term queer is its complete lack of structure in defining it.

Queer is better described as what the normative is not, as an act and state of being with deviant or non-straight characteristics; this typically references a violation of gender and/or sexuality norms but some scholars posit that it can be more than that. Halperin also believes that 'queer' should be seen as "an on-going process of self-constitution and self-transformation – a queer politics anchored in the perilous and shifting sands of non-identity, positionality, discursive reversibility and collective self-invention."[19] In *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, Alexander Doty suggests using queer or queerness to suggest a "range of non-straight expression in, or in response to, mass culture. This range includes specifically gay, lesbian, and bisexual expressions; but it also includes all other potential (and potentially unclassifiable) non-straight positions."[20] In the almost thirty years since the initial academic debates on what queer means, some scholars have come to heavily critique the expansive potential definitions that still linger

[17] Kosofsky-Sedgwick, *Tendencies,* 7.
[18] Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*, 26.
[19] Halperin, *Saint Foucault,* 122.
[20] Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture,* xvi.

around the word. Queer as a term, identity, and descriptor has since become exceedingly trendy with a consistent dissension from individuals over its seeming lack of meaning.[21]

If 'queer' was initially used to speak of transgression, it was meant to mean resistance. Specifically, "taboo breaking, 'monstrosity', and the anti-normal" could be celebrated as they were for what they were - against the norm and in the process demonstrate heteronormativity and cisnormativity. Some scholars believe queer was meant to "be characterized by critique of the taken-for granted, day-to-day mundane activities that constitutes 'normal being'" and in reclaiming and normalizing use of the word in a general public setting, we've stripped 'queer' of its meaning. [22] I disagree with this position, and believe that Sedgwick, Halperin, and Doty's more nebulous understanding allows 'queer' to become more than what it was as against the norm and come to encompass a sense of Otherness that is fundamental to the 'queer' experience. By considering queer as both a noun and verb, we can define it as a "sustained positionality in antithesis to the normative." Queer as a concept has been in a constant evolution that can make it difficult to define it as a term when it exists as a noun, verb, adjective, adverb, identity, state of being, aesthetic and more.

The Postmodern Condition

As I employ a postmodern interpretation in the next chapter, a brief overview would be helpful in clarifying my argument and the methods I consider to reach a conclusion. Postmodernism is noted for being difficult to define; but there are a few recognizable elements that I will expand on and prove to be useful in the following chapters: "an increased virtualization of society, due among other factors to the omnipresence of mass media (and the

[21] Milde, "Pop Goes the Queerness, or (Homo) Sexuality and Its Metaphors."
[22] Watson, "Queer Theory," 73.

related undecidability between fact, fiction, and 'fact' created by 'fiction'); in cultural theory/the humanities, the growing suspicion of notions such as "authenticity" or "essence," the awareness of the constructedness of identity- and reality-constituting concepts, and analytical strategies that read- and deconstruct- the world as a 'text'; the end of all-encompassing grand narratives hierarchically structuring a plurality of other discourses, and, together with this loss, the development of a "postmodern" style which transgresses or closes the gap between high and low culture, and reflects the laws and principles of its own constructedness."[23]

Chapter Summaries

Chapter one further explores some of the background information and theory necessary for the larger analysis. I start with clarifying my definition of camp; this is an integral part of my thesis, as I do not adhere to one specific definition. By its nature, camp is a difficult concept to define unless you pick specific previous scholarly work. My interpretation of camp as a concept is reliant on a postmodern perspective; I explain the relevancy and application of a postmodernist influence on camp and within the context of a queer country music space. I disagree with several key elements of Susan Sontag's essay, "Notes on Camp," and include my rationale for disagreement as I explain how I perceive camp. This chapter differentiates my postmodernist camp from the relevant comparative concepts of kitsch, parody, and irony. Supplementing my personal understanding, I reference social media posts about camp as a partial justification for why my definition should deviate from Sontag's well-established outline. Chapter one includes a brief history of queerness *and* country music, naming notable figures and how they've impacted recent developments. While I consider a specific figure in the next chapter, there are several recent figures in country music history who have made a significant impact and thus impact the

[23] Milde, "Pop Goes the Queerness," 139.

overall space and timeline. In my outline of recent queer country music history, I differentiate between explicitly queer country music artists and artists who have queer identities. The difference between the two is relevant for my overall thesis, as I discuss the implications of an explicitly queer country music space. In anticipation of chapters two and three, I clearly outline the various layers of my examples and how they connect to demonstrate the central topic: the growing queer country music space and its potential for queer country artists as well as the implications of this space overall.

Chapter two of my thesis explores Dolly Parton's construction of a persona, how she has accomplished it over her decades-long career, and the many implications it holds for a queer country music space. I consider how Parton's persona is a gender-based performance that maintains a strict binary of artificiality/authenticity and can be read as an act of postmodern camp. The artificial element of Parton's persona is based around her body and the enaction of camp-based elements, but her body also acts as the bridging factor to her authentic half, her interior. The complexities of Parton's persona prove to be a fruitful case study in how queerness can be inadvertent and simultaneously meaningful. This chapter elaborates on the importance country music places on authenticity and how Parton is able to fulfill those expectations while enacting a queered perspective of gender. In my consideration of her persona and the camp of her performance, I discuss how Parton relates to the concept of a drag queen. I conclude with how her persona has established a precedent within country music for queering space through association and how queer country artists might relate to this. I discuss the popular celebrity drag queen Trixie Mattel as a potential example of Parton's legacy being utilized to justify country music authentication within a queer country music space.

Chapter three of my thesis is dedicated to a more recent addition to the country music and queer country music space, Orville Peck, and his practice of disidentification of Old West and cowboy aesthetics as an act of postmodern camp. Peck is a stage name, and his real identity is not publicly known; his reliance on a persona is intentional and significant for him as an artist. Peck's persona is relevant on multiple levels. First, his choice of the cowboy holds symbolic meaning that is complicated by its queer status and the impact of queering the cowboy as an image. I explain how disidentification is necessary for the use of such a contested and romanticized figure, and how by challenging the hetero- and cis-normative image of a cowboy, the subversiveness of the queer cowboy is emphasized. In my consideration of Peck, I expand on the meaning of authenticity in a queer country music space.

In the conclusion, I consider some of the limitations of my argument and identify two points of potential expansion. In particular, I interrogate my own use of disidentification and elaborate on some of its nuances as a concept. The conclusion also considers the potential for the Internet to be a democratizing method of music production and enjoyment, especially for queer individuals who might identify with a queer country music space.

CHAPTER 1: DEFINING CAMP & QUEER COUNTRY MUSIC

In my initial exploration of camp, I was hesitant to disagree with Sontag's groundbreaking essay because I felt that it had a degree of legitimacy that could not be contested. But as I delved into research on camp, I quickly learned that a significant portion of scholarly work on the subject are responses to Sontag's essay, many of which actively disagree with her. "Notes on Camp" is the second essay listed in Fabio Cleto's 1999 publication, *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*. This reader features twenty-six well-known essays that ruminate on the definition, potential, and future of camp as a phenomenon; many of these essays disagreed with Sontag. Cleto's reader and the expanse of opinions within it helped me discern a clearer timeline of how camp quickly became a contested subject within academia, and this led to me feel that it would be appropriate if I too included my own brief consideration of what camp is to me. And this conclusion introduces another condition that is significant to discussing camp, namely that an individual's perception of camp is impacted by their personal identity and the subjective considerations that come about because of who they are. I do ground my understanding of camp in previous scholarly work, but I will also recognize my own subjective considerations of camp based on my own queer identity and lived experiences.

Before delineating what exactly I include in my definition of camp, it is timely to contend with some of the pre-existing and preeminent scholarly work on it. Instead of speaking generally, I have chosen three specific publications starting with Sontag's "Notes on Camp." The most prominent element of Sontag's definition of camp I disagree with is her assigned apolitical status. Sontag writes that camp is "disengaged, depoliticized," implying that not only is it apolitical but the lack of politics-based meaning or engagement is intentional and desired. She theorizes that queer culture has attempted to sanitize itself by focusing on a 'playfulness,

innocence, and enjoyment" over a moral statement.[24] By 'sanitize' I refer to an act of legitimizing, a desire to be deemed acceptable by normative standards and allowed to exist as meaningless performance. Sanitization, regarding camp, occurs because it not only "normalizes" associations with queerness but may also detract any reactions of moral outrage that often accompanies mainstream perception of gay culture.

Breaking Down Camp

Sontag labels a camp "sensibility and style" to be a type of conversion from the "serious into the frivolous," requiring the participant to see "the world as an aesthetic phenomenon."[25] I take this to mean that the world is limited to a series of images that cannot hold any value besides their innate purpose of being seen. Sontag suggests that *because* camp prioritizes the aesthetic, it cannot value content as well; this conclusion could quickly evolve into an absolutist take on how if camp is "trait a" then it cannot be "trait b", as though "a" and "b" are mutually exclusive. I do not think Sontag provides an undeniable rationale that defends this mutual exclusivity between form and content besides her assertion that is what camp is based on her observations.

The second element of Sontag's camp I disagree with is her proposal that camp is "less satisfying" if it knows that it is camp. She says that "pure examples of Camp are unintentional; they are dead serious." I argue that camp is often an intentional performance, one that the performer simultaneously enjoys for what it literally is *and* for the way their performance is received. Camp's frequent reliance on humor often necessitates that the performer/camp object is laughing with an audience, not assailed by an unwanted external perception that critiques it for

[24] Sontag, "Notes on Camp."
[25] Sontag, "Notes," 1.

being "too much" and thus worthy of ridicule.[26] Sontag says that "probably, intending to be campy is always harmful."[27] This contradicts her later point that "Camp taste turns its back on the good-bad axis of ordinary aesthetic judgment."[28] The contradiction undermines her earlier claim that an intentional camp is "harmful," because (and this is assuming that Sontag believes "harmful" has a negative implication because of the "harm" it causes, using a dictionary definition of "harm"), if camp does not recognize a "good-bad axis," how can it be judged for existing within this "axis"? The contradiction implies that the perception of camp exists on a separate plane of reality than the camp itself; I am assuming that if an individual is enjoying entertainment from a person or object that is camp-y, then they are able to recognize that their participation as watcher or consumer of camp makes them part of the performance. I argue that camp could not exist on a separate plane of judgment, since the audience, whoever that may be and in whatever context it might have, is not able to perceive camp as existing outside a normative structure of judgment as labeling something as camp requires a judgment of perception.

The third element of Sontag's definition I contend with is her seeming dismissal of camp's association with the queer community, since its origins as a concept exist within queerness and its continued presence is overwhelmingly maintained by queer producers, either as performance or object. Many other scholars have critiqued Sontag for this, highlighting how she briefly mentions gay men at the end of the essay, ending her definition without giving much credit to a larger queer community.[29] This dismissal and lack of recognition connects with my

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[26] Sontag, "Notes," 7.
[27] Sontag, "Notes," 6.
[28] Sontag, "Notes," 9.
[29] Babuscio (1994), Bergman (1994), Doty (1997), Dyer (1994), Halperin (1997), Kleinhans (1994), Whiteley (2000)

first critique of Sontag's belief that camp is depoliticized; queerness is inherently political, the queer experience is defined by an existence of living outside the norm, and if camp has roots in queerness, then that builds in the potential to be political. It is not establishing a requirement that camp *must be* politicized or have a detailed deeper meaning, but rather it is a possibility.

Adding to the dismissal of a queer origins, Sontag says that "no one who wholeheartedly shares in a given sensibility can analyze it; he can only, whatever his intention, exhibit it. To name a sensibility, to draw its contours and to recount its history, requires a deep sympathy modified by revulsion."[30] I believe this statement also dismisses a queer participation in camp. I argue that the performance of camp can often require of the audience an analysis and a need to pass judgment. If the audience is queer or familiar with queerness, I do not think revulsion would be present in every reaction to any random example of camp; this is because the audience would have a deeper understanding of the role camp may play in a queer individual or community's life. That which is camp and the process of being camp-y can be an important mode of performance for the queer individual because of their lived experience; the production and consumption of camp can function as a necessary mechanism in the queer individual's life to enable a contestation with the daily oppression of existing as queer. This does demonstrate one of Sontag's observations, that camp is "a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation."[31] I would not hold this as an essential element, but a frequent characterization.

The second scholarly work on camp that I would argue with is from Richard Dyer's *The Culture of Queers*. I am critical of Sontag's disassociation of camp from the queer community, but I am also critical of Dyer's claim that camp is "distinctively and unambiguously gay male." His full quote is that "[camp] is just about the only style, language, and culture that is

[30] Sontag, "Notes," 8.
[31] Sontag, "Notes," 13.

distinctively and unambiguously gay male. In a world drenched in straightness all the images and the words of society express and confirm the rightness of heterosexuality. Camp is the one thing that expresses and confirms being a gay man."[32] For my purpose, part of his point is valid, as it recognizes camp as an inherently queer concept, but I also think this limitation to being "distinctively...gay male" confines camp to a singular realm, when in reality it exists in and is important to larger queer communities. I do understand and recognize the historical context of camp in gay male communities, especially it's role during the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s; I would speculate that Dyer's perspective on camp is impacted by this context and that would provide a rationale for his definitive language regarding its origins and existence. Beyond this acknowledgement, I also agree with existing scholarly work that argues recognition for camp practices as coming from traditionally feminine practices; in particular, the role transgender women in the queer community play in developing examples of camp is excluded by Dyer's conceptualization.[33]

The third work I contend with is Chuck Kleinhans' essay, "Taking Out the Trash: Camp and the Politics of Parody." I had less disagreements with Kleinhans' conceptualization but there were two elements that I do argue against, both of which arguably reflect influence from Sontag's essay. First, Kleinhans proposes that "Camp pushes a poorly done form to the limits so its very badness is what the work is about."[34] This is a recurring theme in scholarly work on camp, an insistence that it revolves around "trash" and is perceived like the colloquial saying, "it's so bad, it's good." My disagreement with this element stems from the postmodern theoretical framework that I reference throughout my thesis. Later on, I will clarify how

[32] Dyer, *The Culture of Queers,* 11.
[33] Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna.*
[34] Kleinhans, "Taking out the Trash: Camp and the Politics of Parody," 189.

postmodernism fully impacts an expression of camp, but first to address this specific criticism, labeling camp as something that is perceived as "bad" is not relevant or applicable from a postmodern perspective, as absolute statements or judgments do not typically exist. Kleinhans says that "low camp deliberately celebrates bad taste" and things can "facilitate a camp reading because it invites scornful laughter due to its ineptness," but camp does not have to always be characterized by these descriptors. It's possible to make an argument that a specific example of camp is made camp-y because of *how* it "celebrates bad taste" but it is not a requirement for camp to "invite scornful laughter." [35]

My criticism so far begs the very relevant question: if I disagree with these perspectives on camp, how exactly do *I* define camp? What do I include and why? To answer this, I have chosen several scholarly works on camp that contain elements I 1) agree with and 2) see demonstrated via the examples I consider in chapters two and three. I will then explain how a postmodern perspective is relevant and how I apply it to my reading of camp performances.

In *Queerness in Pop Music: Aesthetics, Gender Norms, and Temporality*, music scholar Stan Hawkins says that "camp as a political tool forms an important component of queerness, and therefore performativity," which helps to consider queerness and camp as intertwining elements that can work together and overlap.[36] Hawkins' choice to imply queerness is inherently connected to performativity is influenced by basic queer theory like Sedgwick's definition of queer and Judith Butler's theory on gender as performance. Adding to this and further reflecting Butler's work in particular, Hawkins' suggestion that the "workings of gender through the performance of drag, masquerade, and camp in pop texts can be read as oppositional and subversive," corroborates my earlier claim that camp is innately queer and this characteristic can

[35] Kleinhans, "Taking Out the Trash," 186 & 198.
[36] Hawkins, *Queerness in Pop Music*, 135.

have implications for what we label as camp.[37] From Hawkins' work, the conclusion I took away is that my readings of camp should consider how queerness is relevant and working in the situation.

In Fabio Cleto's reader, Mark Booth's essay "Campe-toi! On the Origins and Definitions of Camp," relates camp to the concept of self-presentation and makes a connection between camp and its historical role in queer communities as a declaration of belonging to "the marginal."[38] He differs from Sontag's attention to androgyny with his more binary approach, identifying "the marginal" as "the traditionally feminine which camp parodies in an exhibition of stylized effeminacy...throwing an ironical light not only on the abstract concept of the sexual stereo-type, but also on the parodist him or herself."[39] Booth's attention to camp as it relates to gender and presentation as well as his inclusion of a politicized statement are relevant to my conceptualization of camp. Booth noted the "exhibition of stylized effeminacy," as highlighting the ridiculosity of stereotypes; this is an example of how camp can be politicized, especially depending on the context. I expand my definition of "the marginal" to include a queer interpretation of masculinity, specifically in chapter three with my analysis of singer Orville Peck; I elaborate on how a queering of cowboys can relate subversive messaging about the limitations of traditional patriarchal and heterocentric masculinity.

The third work I use as reference is Pamela Robertson's argument regarding female camp icons and how we can and should use popular culture as a political and critical instrument in the deconstruction of masculinity and femininity. This continues with Booth's sentiment, but Robertson's focus is on gender-based stereotypes whereas Booth wrote of sexual stereotypes.

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[37] Hawkins, *Queerness in Pop Music: Aesthetics, Gender Norms, and Temporality*.
[38] Booth, "Campe-toi," 69.
[39] Booth, "Campe-toi!."

Robertson argues that through an identification with these icons (she studied women such as Madonna and Mae West), women can escape the bounds of reductive views of femininity; the use of identificatory fantasies and practices shows the audience how a form of camp can allow them to distance themselves from sex and gender stereotypes and to view women's every day roles as female impersonation.[40] This perspective influenced my approach to camp in chapter one with my analysis of Dolly Parton and her gender-based performance. I expanded beyond her focus on distancing from stereotypes to consider other implications that camp performances can have, particularly regarding queerness as a characteristic and action.

Despite my detailed critique of Sontag's conceptualization, there are certain elements included in her definition which I read as fundamental to camp. Or, to avoid a totalizing sentiment, *I* would include them as fundamental, based on my subjective definition. Specifically, I agree that to "perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility of the metaphor of life as theater."[41]

In her article, "Pop Goes the Queerness, or, (Homo) Sexuality and Its Metaphors: On the Importance of Gay Sensibilities in Postmodern Culture and Theory," scholar Nadine Milde explores the potential for camp to be considered a postmodern object. She says that "camp [is] a style that does not only playfully deconstruct the categories of "maleness" and "femaleness," but tends much more generally toward a recognition of 'the world' as a discursive construct, a playful theatricality bound to apply irony and quotation marks to any re/appropriable object or category-[much like] postmodernism."[42] It is possible to construct a more detailed argument as to why camp itself is innately postmodern, but that is not my goal. In Jodie Taylor's *Playing it Queer:*

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[40] Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures*, 53.
[41] Sontag, "Notes," 4.
[42] Milde, "Pop Goes the Queerness," 146.

Popular Music, Identity, and Queer World-Making, she notes that camp cannot be explained concisely as it "has multiple linguistic functions," acting as subject, object, and descriptor; one can be camp but one can also act camp.[43] It is this quality that shapes my conceptualization of camp to include a postmodern influence, as camp can exist in multiple forms at once, with the potential for contradiction. Viewing camp as a concept through a postmodern framing is more effective in understanding its effectiveness as a performance.

Linda Hutcheon's conceptualization of the postmodern parody is relevant to my understanding camp. She defines it as "a value-problematizing, denaturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representations."[44] Taylor utilizes this definition to posit that "camp uses parody to critique the ideologies of the dominant class and expose multiple manifestations of gender and sexuality that are often considered poor taste." This point can be considered a form of circular reasoning, as camp and parody work in tandem, and so it is possible to have a parodic approach to camp or for camp to be a parodistic strategy. Building on Hutcheon's concept of a postmodern parody, there are three other concepts that are popular companions to academic discussions of camp: irony, nostalgia, and kitsch. Camp is often compared to or equated to irony, parody, and kitsch, with an emphasis on nostalgia. In "Notes on Camp," Sontag says "Time liberates the work of art from moral relevance, delivering it over to the Camp sensibility…"[45] I interpret this to mean that nostalgia, a desire and longing for a past time period, allows for camp to develop as it often features objects that have been culturally labeled as outdated. It is necessary to provide some delineations, but irony and parody are less important as they can function as descriptors whereas kitsch can be considered a separate

[43] Taylor, *Playing it Queer*, 67.
[44] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 94.
[45] Sontag, "Notes," 8.

concept. In a similar vein to camp, it is difficult to provide a specific definition for kitsch as an aesthetic.[46] Clement Greenberg defined kitsch as "a commercial, universal and immediate kind of art, not 'true' art at all, readily consumed by the bourgeois classes, and constituting the first 'universal culture' ever witnessed."[47] Using this as a rough basis, I will be approaching the kitsch aesthetic as reproductions of original art that are made mass-consumable and promote an illusory conceptualization of continuity and stability; this approach differentiates examples of camp from kitsch as they fulfill different purposes and can manifest in dramatically different ways.

Theodor W. Adorno's essay "Kitsch" is aphoristic at best, but he too notes kitsch as "illusory," though he focuses on its connection to the Marxist idea of "false consciousness," as kitsch is a product of the culture industry and works ultimately as a tool of deceit against the lower classes. In particular, Adorno maintains that "the masses need a stronger anesthetic or escape from the agonizing realities of a global capitalist culture, and so kitsch can no longer romanticize death; instead, it denies it altogether."[48] This "denial of death" is seen in the appeal of kitsch for its "familiarity, and its validation of shared sensibilities" and likewise, Adorno maintained that kitsch music does not allow for any originality whatsoever.

When I use the term "camp" in my following chapters, as I do many times, I am referring to my definition, which I frame as postmodern. I am not referring to Sontag, Booth, Dyer, or Hawkins, but rather my specific interpretation of camp as a concept, and, as influenced by a postmodern emphasis on the real/unreal and the connection between the postmodern self and the queer self. In my following chapters, I will use examples to fully demonstrate how camp can be viewed as postmodern, as more specific examples facilitate a better understanding overall. As I

[46] Barnes, "Between Modern and Postmodern Worlds."
[47] Barnes, "Between Modern and Postmodern Worlds."
[48] Barnes, "Between Modern and Postmodern Worlds," 32.

am considering how postmodern camp relates to queerness and country music, a brief review of queer country music history will provide a necessary and useful context for how the queer country music space has definitively evolved over time. Following a chronological timeline by decades, I will explain how explicit queerness in country music has existed for almost fifty years and what implications this has for constructing a more visible and validated queer country music space.

Queerness in Country Music History

With their self-titled debut album in 1973, Lavender Country released the first openly gay country album.[49] Fronted by songwriter Patrick Haggerty, the songs on *Lavender Country* (the album) are "sonically, in the same ballpark as someone like [Hank] Williams, [but] with a kind of wonderfully campy, melodic effervescence."[50] *Lavender Country* features songs like "Back in the Closet" and "Cryin' These Cocksucking Tears," whose lyrics reflect explicitly queer experiences of love and the coming-out process. Another song on the album, "Straight White Patterns," is about the "lasting material damage that white, hetero and gender-normative culture does."[51]Their debut album remained their only album until 2019 with the release of *Blackberry Rose and Other Songs and Sorrows;* however, it was self-released and limited to CD sales at local shows. In February 2022, they released *Blackberry Rose* via Don Giovanni Records, but it features a different track list from the 2019 version. In a 2016 documentary titled, *These C*cksucking Tears,* front man Haggerty details what it was like being barred from even attempting mainstream country success because of the openness he insisted towards his sexuality

[49] Cholst, "Lavender Country to Orville Peck: A History of Queer Country."
[50] Gallagher, "Orville Peck and Beyond: History of Queer Artists in Country Music."
[51] Gallagher, "Orville Peck and Beyond."

and experience as a gay man. He said, “what Lavender Country meant [was that for] 40 years was the doors were shut. I was denied access to Nashville.”

The 1980s and early 1990s were primarily defined by then-closeted k.d. lang, who faced early opposition from mainstream country music due to her visually gender-defying appearance and veganism.[52] It is noteworthy that since coming out, lang has not released much explicitly country music. In Bill Malone’s *Country Music: USA,* he writes about her first few albums and their explicitly country sound and marketing but that “she received little radio coverage in country music and eventually abandoned the field for a career in mainline pop music, a consequence of her musical experimentation and divergent lifestyle." Malone also says that despite her Grammy awards in the late 1980s, she “was essentially a torch singer with a sound best suited to blues and soul music.”[53]

The 1990s are also home to the folk revival and known for the popular Lilith Fair. In an article on queer country music, journalist Alex Gallagher notes that “Lesbian folk musicians of the ‘90s have become something of a throwaway joke, but let’s face it: If these artists were debuting in 2021, they’d be considered the cutting edge of Americana rather than idealistic neo-hippies.” These artists include The Indigo Girls, Tracy Chapman, and Melissa Etheridge. These women were contemporaries of lang’s but technically categorized as alternative-folk musicians, occupying a subgenre of country and folk that has worked hard to maintain boundaries differentiating their politics from that of mainstream country music. Their music often featured queer allusions or explicit references, with Etheridge’s coming-out and 1993 album *Yes I Am* making history for being an “open and life-affirming portrait of gay life.”[54] But *Yes I Am* was

[52] Gallagher, “Orville Peck and Beyond.”
[53] Malone & Laird, *Country Music: USA,* 499.
[54] Cholst, “Lavender Country.”

also never marketed as country, remaining firmly within the more progressive-friendly alternative-folk.

As we moved into the 2000s, there has been a huge surge in publicly out country musicians, likely reflective of changing socio-cultural norms regarding non-straight sexualities. Some examples include Brandi Carlile, Brandy Clark, Karen & the Sorrows, Amethyst Kiah, Sam Gleaves, Justin Hiltner, Lavender Country, Lil Nas X, Little Bandit, Trixie Mattel, Paisley Fields, Orville Peck, and Brandon Stansell. Karen Pittelman of the band, Karen & the Sorrows, has been organizing a welcoming queer country scene in Brooklyn since 2011. Her concert series, Queer Country Quarterly, has helped promote queer country artists in New York City and is working to spread across the country and internationally; rising musician Amythyst Kiah is an example of Pittelman's growing success as an alumna of Queer Country Quarterly.

Sources on queer country music history are quite limited, and the history itself is also limited to the few dozen artists over the last fifty years who have been publicly out as non-straight. But my research revealed an observation on the reception of different artists based on how they spoke about their identity. Before the 1990s, it was extremely difficult to be a queer country musician, and the possibility of mid-level success in a general country space was near impossible. As we progressed into the early to mid 2000s, a few rising and established country stars came out, namely Chely Wright and Ty Herndon are excellent examples. They faced significant backlash for supposedly "duping their fans," as they had cultivated heteronormative images before they came out. Herndon, Wright, and other examples like popular songwriters Brandy Clark and Shane McAnally have been publicly out but maintain a relatively low-profile as they operate in mainstream-country music. Herndon came out in 2014 but only recently

(2022) started changing pronouns in his songs to be queer-friendly.[55] From my research, I have noticed that queer country artists in the last ten years often fall in one of two categories: 1) maintains a low-profile in mainstream country music with occasional-to-often setbacks from dealing with more conservative and often blatantly homophobic behavior from industry professionals and fans like Ty Herndon, Brandon Stansell, and Chely Wright; or 2) operate in a country-adjacent subgenre, attracting a fanbase that is mostly outside of mainstream country music but building a steady career like Brandi Carlile and Amythyst Kiah.

2021 marks a significant turning point in queer country music history, with more publicly queer country musicians than ever before; most notably Brooke Eden and TJ Osbourne are new additions to the roster and instead of mirroring Herndon and Wright's experiences in the early 2010s, both stars have maintained and continued growing a mainstream audience. While Eden and Osbourne's experience so far has appeared positive, they are only two artists out of an increasingly large category with an increasingly large audience. The Internet in particular has been effective at growing a space for potential and current country music fans who are expressing desire for a country music that reflects their values and experiences.[56] Through my analyses of Dolly Parton and Orville Peck, I explain how expressions of postmodern camp demonstrate how country music can be and already has a space for queer people. Previous scholarship on the potential impact of queer country music for queer rural residents has focused on how acceptance from the mainstream could be a positive force for these individuals, proposing that a familiar setting could change their personal feelings towards their identities.[57]

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[55] Cholst, "Lavender Country."
[56] Jackson, "Y'Allternative TikTokers."
[57] Veline, "Object of Your Rejection: The Symbolic Annihilation and Recuperation Of Queer Identities In Country Music."

Based on my theoretical framing within queer theory and postmodernism, I argue that acceptance by the mainstream may not have to be the ultimate end goal. If queerness as a concept is meant to convey a perpetual state of being outside the norm, of being an Other who violates norms, especially norms regarding gender and sexuality, then wouldn't a presence in mainstream success be contradictory or counterproductive? It may be more impactful to focus efforts on building a queer country music subgenre that contains explicitly queer artists, whose music and image reflect their queerness. Artists like Eden and Osbourne can still operate within the mainstream, but in doing so they have to contend with the fact that many members of their audience and the industry holds onto heteronormative beliefs and actions; there is a degree of assimilation that does not have to be viewed in a negative way, but it is part of the conditions for existing within the mainstream. Queer country music as its own recognized subgenre could provide a space for queer country fans who desire music and experiences that reflect their queer identity and want all the implications of queering a space. This space would differentiate from alternative country or folk-country or Americana, which are more general and contain implied and literal degrees of progressivism. But a queer country space would exist specifically for fans of explicit queerness, with the provision that the subgenre can still be labeled as "authentic" to country music, the larger genre with a long history. I demonstrate how this is possible through my case study analyses and explain the implications of queering space. For artists like Orville Peck, Karen & the Sorrows, or Amythyst Kiah, a recognized queer country subgenre could provide a space that allows challenging boundaries; artists like Karen Pittleman of Karen & the Sorrows have already started building this space, but if there was a conscious effort by a collective that recognizes each other, then the space would solidify into a real platform for queer country fans to look to. And recognition as a subgenre need not come from the mainstream

entirely, that defeats the point of paying attention to queerness as a subject. Rather, authenticity as a concept can be contested to mean something specific to the space, with the potential to base it off precedents set by artists like Dolly Parton, who has a decades-long career of challenging gender via performance (as I explore in the next chapter).

Authenticity & A Queer Space

Authenticity as a concept is difficult to define, and according to postmodern theory, one does not and cannot define a nebulous and intangible concept like that. However, I believe that Allan Moore's work on authenticity and authentication is an acceptable method of interpersonal communication based on historical precedent. Authenticity as a concept may not have a definition but can exist on an individual level, measured and meaning whatever the individual assigns to it. Moore's concept of third person authenticity "arises when a performer succeeds in conveying the impression of accurately representing the ideas of another, embedded within a tradition of performance." This is not the most postmodern of ideas, but it does, in and of itself, demonstrate the postmodern *influence* I maintain, by its ability to be and not to be something at once. Artists within a queer country music space can invoke validation of authenticity by their own will and to the degree they decide. Philip Auslander's work on authenticity can also be considered relevant, as he states that "authenticity is often located in current music's relationship to an earlier, "purer" moment in a mythic history of the music.``[58] If queer country music was a newly established (as in stated and intentionally constructed) subgenre, then couldn't its authenticity be located within its recent past or borrowing from "mythic history," which may not be real in itself? The next two chapters explores the potential answers to how queer country

[58] Auslander, *Performance: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies.*

music may form and why a postmodern camp could translate to a form of authenticity that enables the formal construction and self-recognition of the subgenre.

CHAPTER 2: DOLLY PARTON'S PERSONA & PRECEDENCE

"If I hadn't been born a woman, I would have been a drag queen." In her autobiography, *Dolly: My Life and Other Unfinished Business*, Dolly Parton expresses appreciation for the aesthetic of drag queens, focusing on their display of gender and femininity as a performance. Over the years, Parton has not been a stranger to her niche queer fan base, especially in the last 20 years as she has expressed frequent and explicit support for her LGBTQ+ audience.[59] She has also gained an icon status within not only country music but popular culture as a whole. Parton cemented her mainstream celebrity status in the 1980s, most notably through her acting roles in popular films *9 to 5* and *Steel Magnolias*; within these roles she played characters much like the celebrity persona she performed for the public in her real life.

This persona has particularly bolstered her icon status, specifically through her balancing act between exaggerated gender and artificiality with a narrative of working-class authenticity.[60] In the last ten years there has been a surge in academic publications on Parton, with several focused on her constructed persona and the impact it has had on country music as a genre.[61] But none address the potential *influence* that her persona has had on the growing ranks of publicly queer country artists and the changing perception of country music as a genre.

As I've established, I believe that a queer presence in country music does not have to be limited to acceptance by the mainstream. It's possible that some queer country artists might want to blur genre boundaries or operate almost outside of the strictly drawn lines of mainstream country music; one such artist who demonstrates both motivations and is popular drag queen Trixie Mattel. Beyond existing outside mainstream country, Mattel also reflects Parton's impact

[59] Myhre, "*Shades of Pink: Performing Dolly Parton.*"
[60] Syson, "*Becoming Dolly Parton: A Case of Constructed Identity."*
[61] Bell (2017), Deering-Crosby & Lynn (2017), Edwards (2018), Hoppe (2017), Myhre (2010), Syson (2021)

on what constitutes acceptable aesthetics in country music. It's not about completely erasing the lines of genre, but pushing or blurring boundaries to exist in a possibly in-between area.

Coming to fame as a competitor on the 2015 season of the very popular reality competition show, *RuPaul's Drag Race,* Mattel has since grown to become a social media personality, entrepreneur, and singer-songwriter with three released albums and over one million subscribers on YouTube. While Parton is not often cited as Mattel's primary inspiration, she has been listed as a celebrity figure that Mattel is "obsessed with"[62]; I argue that the influence of Parton's image is undeniable on Mattel's signature acoustic guitar, voluminous blonde wig, and fondness for bright and rhinestone-heavy attire. Parton's historicized persona and its two halves have allowed for musicians like Mattel to push boundaries but also recreate recognizable base elements of country music like valuing authenticity through artifice. Additionally, the concept and potential of a queer country music subgenre is further built by the presence of figures like Mattel, who inherently queer the space they occupy through a subversion of gender performance.

Parton's persona is also a demonstration of camp with a postmodern influence. She is able to exist as traditionally opposing concepts of authenticity and artificiality at the same time; in fact, her persona is reliant on the maintenance of her duality. Parton has constructed a postmodern body that works in tandem with her persona as a display of camp, a stylistic emphasis on visual exaggeration. By my understanding of camp, the intentional attention to exaggerated gender, in this case via hyperfemininity, is an act of transgressiveness within a genre and space that has traditionally been associated with much more conservative values, especially regarding gender and sexuality. Camp's association with queerness and violating the norm reaffirms its existence as a political act, and by skillfully disguising this act to be seen as

[62] Mattel, interview with Marissa Lorusso.

acceptable, Parton has helped set a precedent that queer artists are familiar and comfortable with, providing a door into country music that allows them to create their own space and be who they are as they are.

Additionally, Parton's persona can be viewed as a gender-based performance that is highly reminiscent of drag; it is only slightly differentiated by Parton's own words, as she's previously labeled herself as a "living drag queen." The difference being the inclusion of the word "living", as use of this qualifier is meant to reference how she lives in the public eye as her persona. For most drag queens, the costumery and performance is often limited to a specific time on a stage of some sort.[63] Parton's own differentiation is that she "lives" as a drag queen, reinforcing the idea that her persona is a creation but can be trusted as truth, as measuring up to the subjective standard of authenticity of personhood within not only country music but the general public eye. For drag queens like Mattel, Parton's persona is an intimately familiar performance that has been and will continue to be enticing, encouraging them to engage with country music, at least as a genre as opposed to the industry as a whole. Parton's persona and consistent beliefs have not and will not change country music as an industry, but she is a visible and prominent figure that could contribute to the ongoing changes of the genre's reputation as perceived by potential audience members, especially queer listeners.

Exterior/Artificiality

In a 1990 interview, Parton was asked if her image "had any limitations...or get in [her] way," and she responded, "My image get in my way? Ya gotta be crazy. It's my image that gets me most everything I want. I created the whole thing. My gimmick and my look, it all comes from a very serious place."[64] Her response to this interview was far from unique, as part of her

[63] Hobson, "Performative Tensions in Female Drag Performances." 35-51.
[64] Parton, interview with Karen Jaehn.

claim for authenticity includes consistent references to the artificiality of her persona and how it was intentional. Over the decades, Parton has taken her persona very seriously, intentionally creating an interior-exterior duality based on artificiality and authenticity in a singular package to appeal to a broad audience whilst toeing the line of transgressive and acceptable. This duality is reflective of a postmodern influence as she is able to exist as both at the same time. Parton can be artificial and authentic, transgressive and still widely accepted by the mainstream. Parton herself acknowledged this duality as early as 1977, when she did an interview for *Newsweek* and said "my inner sadness and joy are as real as my hair and nails are fake. That's what I like—looking like one thing and being another."[65]

The exterior-based and artificial half of Parton's persona focuses on her physical appearance, specifically her use of hyperfemininity and the emphasis on the physicality of her body. Since the beginning of her career, Parton's physical appearance and how she dresses has been a topic of speculation. The hyperfemininity of Parton's persona was defined by an extensive and now iconic use of rhinestones on often pink or other brightly colored, revealing clothing; to the public, her makeup, hair, and nails were always done and overly noticeable. Special attention was paid to making every detail possible glitzy and gaudy. Parton was able to use her petite frame to seemingly latch onto a stereotyped image of femininity as delicate and gentle, with makeup that intentionally emphasized feminine-associated traits like her lips, wide eyes, and long hair; she added to this by speaking in a high-pitched voice and frequently giggling at her own jokes.[66]

Parton wasn't just hyperfeminine, she was also intentionally portraying an exaggerated idea of gender. During the first half of her career, she was to many, especially second-wave feminists,

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[65] Parton, interview with Pete Axthelm.
[66] Bell, "Dolly Parton and Southern Womanhood: Race, Respectability, and Sexuality in the Mid-Century South."

confirming gender stereotypes through her performance, but a more recent perspective relabels it as "[serving] as a model for female empowerment or a queer celebration of artifice."[67] There was a high degree of purposeful self-objectification, with almost all her rhinestone-adorned outfits also being low-cut to display her prominent bust. Of her physical features, Parton's surgically enhanced bust is the most discussed and the cornerstone of her hyperfeminine performance, building on associations between femininity and breasts. The shared use and possession of "fake" or artificially created breasts is one of several connections to drag queens that Parton herself has acknowledged; she has consistently been open about the surgery and enhancements that she intentionally uses to emphasize the appearance of her bust.[68]

Her bust's status as surgically enhanced is one part of her focus on the physical. In her 1994 autobiography, Parton said, "I have done it and will do it again when something in my mirror doesn't look to me like it belongs on Dolly Parton . . . I feel it is my duty to myself and my public."[69] This self-reference to "Dolly Parton " is interesting because it confirms what her caricatured appearance loudly claims, and that is how she has relegated her body as part of the persona. Her word choice of "duty...to [the] public" is also interesting as Parton has faced constant and heavy scrutiny over her choices regarding her body.[70] Parton has been willing to surgically alter herself as part of a need to maintain a consistently exaggerated appearance, and many latch onto this very visible element as the first and most prominent characteristic they associate with her.

A 1998 interview for *The Observer* is an interesting demonstration of this heavy association. The interviewer, William Leith, pays excessive attention to how she looks and how he perceives

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[67] Myhre, "Shades of Pink," 55.
[68] Parton, interview with RuPaul Charles.
[69] Parton, *Dolly: My Life and Other Unfinished Business,* 287.
[70] Myhre, "Shades of Pink."

her appearance. He is seemingly entranced by seeing her caricature in person, questioning himself if this is the real Dolly Parton or "if any case, the real Dolly Parton is an actress playing the part of Dolly Parton."[71] Before transcribing the interview, Leith starts the article by going into detail on her appearance, saying:

"She shakes my hand, beaming powerfully. Her nails are long and red. She is wearing a wig in the shape of a shaggy bob. She does not look real.... Her lips look as if they have an extra dimension; there are inner bits and outer, permanently pouting bits. She has a tiny waist and huge, firm-looking breasts, the top halves of which are on display. The breasts look as if they are full of air, rather than plastic or jelly. They seem to hover between us, generating a force-field of their own. I will not mention them. I will wait for her to mention them."[72]

Even as Parton speaks mostly unprompted on the hardships of her childhood, which albeit is a common subject for her, Leith continues to notice and remark on her opening cardigan multiple times. This interview was not entirely unusual for its attention to her body, but it did demonstrate how even as she spoke about herself, the authentic interior, the public focus never forgot the construction of who was speaking.

Parton's hyperfeminine performance aligns with many iterations of what camp is, including my own.[73] Camp can be and is often associated with performances of femininity to the point of exaggeration using very visual elements like appearance and costumery; this concept is heavily applicable to Parton's entire appearance and the performance of gender associated with it. Parton is able to move past the Sontagian definition of camp because of her intent and because of the complexity of her performance. Parton is not hyperfeminine or maintains a persona *only* because she wants to but has also been consistent with an intentionality to challenge conservative expectations of what is an acceptable amount of gender.[74]

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[71] Parton, interview with William Leith.
[72] Leith, "Lonesome Cowgirl: Dolly Parton."
[73] Myhre, "Shades of Pink."
[74] Edwards, *Dolly Parton: Gender and Country Music.*

Country music itself does not always contain or display conservative values but a large sector of individuals ensures the industry as whole continues to 1) function with an attachment to these values and 2) be perceived as mutually exclusive with these values. In this context, Dolly Parton's consistent gender-based performance and her immense success that exists both because and despite it, can be considered pioneering and meaningful to current and future country artists.

The postmodern element of her camp-y performance is important because it characterizes how and why her performance is important. She critiques normalized gender performance with itself, maintaining a duality with her performance that complicates how it can be received and considered. By just existing her body is made real but then in its artificiality and constructedness, it can be considered unreal. Parton's focus on specific body parts as part of her performance is another example of the postmodern influence. "Dolly Parton in all her simulated Southern Belle outlook … inhabits… an artificially reconstructed body. The body in question here is far from a biological essence: it is a crossroad of intensive forces; it is a surface of inscriptions of social codes."[75] The only reason her body as a construction or as an "surface of inscription" matters is because of her celebrity status and how she has incorporated it into the performance of her celebrity persona. Parton exists as a critique and a celebration.

Interior/Authenticity

It is possible that country music's strong relationship with the concept of authenticity might prove the best possible route for artists who want the genre to expand. A significant weight is assigned to "being authentic," and what that might entail as "authenticity is often located in current music's relationship to an earlier, "purer" moment in a mythic history of the music." [76] Parton's persona and its half based on authenticity has shown that it is possible to be accepted as

[75] Braidotti, "Cyberfeminism with a Difference," 240.
[76] Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture,* 71.

authentic in country music even if there are elements of your identity that the mainstream audience is not always supportive of. More than that, however, is the potential to label oneself as authentic to country music even if one is not accepted by the mainstream audience and industry as a whole.

Allan Moore's three-part category system that explains how authenticity as a concept might be constructed is a crucial element of my analysis of Parton and her potential impact. His definition of "third person authenticity" describes how and why Parton's legacy works as a potential pathway to challenging the norms of mainstream country. As stated in the previous chapter, third person authenticity "arises when a performer succeeds in conveying the impression of accurately representing the ideas of another, embedded within a tradition of performance."[77] Newer artists can invoke the legitimacy of the "original" or older country, referencing Parton as an icon as made possible by her mythologization, and utilize it as a tool of legitimizing their music and performances. But, as Parton has demonstrated, it may be easier to develop a persona separate from the real self but based in reality that can essentially bear the mantle for them.

To a degree, a new conceptualization of authenticity in country music might benefit from the use of carefully constructed personas that demonstrate an honest intentionality in their construction; an individual person's complexities can become disputable and questioned in a social media environment, so if an artist fully controls what the audience sees and knows about them, they can use this to their advantage by ensuring the audience sees only a carefully clear image. They are authentic because their performance persona exists truthfully within its well-defined boundaries. But there are two other elements of Parton's persona that most likely need to be incorporated as well for this conceptualization of authenticity to work; first is how much the

[77] Moore, "Authenticity as Authentication," 218.

persona is grounded in reality. Parton was always clear with the audience that her persona is an exaggerated version of her, one they could find entertaining for her music and because of its exaggeration and attention to visual aesthetic.

The persona has to retain a sense of personality and convey, both explicitly and implicitly, something about the person inside. Parton's constant references to her "insides" compared to her "outsides" has helped make this separation understandable to the mainstream country audience.[78] This also demonstrates the second element of Parton's persona that should be included: her consistent intentionality and an openness of intentionality with the public. For a persona to be considered "real," the artist needs to point out their own "fake-ness" and help the audience feel "in on the joke." Parton's successful entrepreneurship was aided by how she "openly discusses her strategies regarding the construction of her image in almost every interview...the external Dolly image is a facade she has created to market herself."[79] The open intentionality of Parton's persona has been necessary in maintaining her narrative of authenticity and an excessively artificial exterior. She has spent years proving that her personality could be both genuine and part of the persona whilst maintaining consistent artificial elements.

Because she was successful and continues to prove that her particular demonstration of authenticity is accepted by the mainstream country music industry as a whole, she has helped establish a precedent for other artists. Parton's success lends credence to the idea that someone like a drag queen, who is a literal performance of gender and expression of queerness, might be able to exist whilst still being worthy of the quintessential country trait of "being real." Her

[78] Edwards, *Dolly Parton.*
[79] Wilson, "Mountains of Contradictions: Gender, Class, and Region in the Star Image of Dolly Parton," 109.

performance of hyperfemininity "allows others such as drag queens to temporarily embody the female gender, often in a relatively safe space."[80]

To ground her persona in reality and convince the audience of her authentic sincerity, Parton has incorporated a few elements related to her personal life, elements that have been especially important within the conservative milieu of country music. If her body is the crux of the artificial half, Parton's childhood is essential to the early development of her authentic half. In addition to her famous enhanced appearance, Parton is well known for speaking about her rural and impoverished upbringing. She has frequently referenced that the inspiration for her physical appearance came from the "town tramp" and how she knew many regarded her gaudiness as an extension of a "white trash" influence.[81]

An earlier scholar on Parton, Pamela Fox, argued that Parton intentionally references her "poor taste-continuing the legacy of her low-class roots… as a tool in subaltern identity formation."[82] While studying the honky-tonk community of country music, music scholar Aaron Fox outlined the concept of the "ideally imperfect" of "real country." Essentially, how "perfection is, in fact, the province of the high-class and is therefore inauthentic and disdainful."[83] And so, Parton has shaped her career to reflect a connection to a "rural pride in which one's cultural capital is built on a distinct lack of perfection."[84] Another concept that decidedly challenges normative ideals of perfection and the category of the high-class? My definition of camp; as explained in the previous chapter, there are some unassailable elements of camp that must be acknowledged,

[80] Syson, "Shades of Pink," 23.
[81] Edwards, *Dolly Parton*.
[82] Fox, "Recycled Trash: Gender and Authenticity in Country Music Autobiography," 237.
[83] Scofield, "'Nipped, Tucked, or Sucked': Dolly Parton and the Construction of the Authentic Body," 661.
[84] Scofield, "Nipped, Tucked, or Sucked," 662.

regardless of theoretical framework and its disdain for what has been canonized or held in esteem remains constant.

Parton herself identified the lack of association between womanhood and rurality, noting that "womanhood was a difficult thing to get a grip on in those hills**,** unless you were a man. My sisters and I used to cling desperately to anything halfway feminine."[85] The bridge linking the physicality-based half of her persona to the authenticity half is the mutual importance of the body as a site, 1) for performing hyperfemininity and 2) for being working-class.[86] Because the physicality of bodies is often associated with a working-class status and her authenticity narrative is reliant on the working class status, the artificiality of her body does not undermine the authenticity of her interior. In fact, Parton's emphasis on her own body, both what and how she emphasized, is important for current and prospective queer country artists.

Parton has actually drawn on a "mountain-born drive toward survival and even improvement, [rendering] bodily upkeep as a form of labor that must be undertaken with great effort and commitment."[87] In other words, her bodily performance has been defined by an association with labor, something that the working-class audience of country music can relate to in a contrived way. Another figure who can relate to the intentional manipulation of bodily appearance? The drag queen. One could extend it to many individuals who queer their existence or actions through the body. In queer theory, the body does not exist separately from culture, it is constructed; while it may not be in the same exact way that a non-queer working -class audience might enact, it is a similarity in action. And, adding to the connection between the body, class, and a postmodern camp is how "Parton's camp would be understood in a country music performance

[85]Fox, "Recycled 'Trash.'"
[86] Bell, "Dolly Parton and Southern Womanhood."
[87] Scofield, "Nipped, Tucked, or Sucked," 668.

context as an obviously exaggerated parody, not as a realistic portrayal of white, working-class femininity. Working-class audiences familiar with country music would know she is making a joke."[88] To clarify the point, Parton's body, and the body as a site of expression of labor, is a shared concept for a queer perspective and a nonqueer, potentially conservative working-class perspective. And adding to this is the idea that the performance of camp, a camp that is made flexible by its postmodern status, might also be a shared point between these two different audience members. This is not to reduce categories into essentialist labels, but rather to identify that the long-associated "typical" audience of country music is that of the conservative, working-class, heterosexual individual. Someone who is definitively not queer in their identity, actions, or perspectives is the same audience demographic that has upheld country music's emphasis on authenticity.[89] And these similarities work to support my overarching point that queer country music as its own space can exist while being explicitly queer and still be attached to such a fundamental element, simultaneously proving its own right to exist both to itself and to an external perspective even if the latter is not the end goal.

Parton has been able to manipulate her own autobiography into a type of mythology, contributing to the mythologizing impact of her persona; the constructed narrative was necessary to fuse the halves together. Since her career started in the late 1960s, Parton has tried to juxtapose the "fakeness" of what she looks like, and represents through her looks, with the self-referenced "realness" of her interior. She calls her aesthetic, "hillbilly tramp," very aware of the gendered associations that come with said terminology.[90] The act and conveyance of self-awareness has been essential in aiding the construction of a complex narrative; by making a joke about herself

[88] Edwards, *Dolly Parton,* 144.
[89] Malone & Laird, *Country Music: USA.*
[90] Edwards, *Dolly Parton,* 36.

and making it before anyone else by including it as part of her persona, Parton was able to bypass the criticism she knew she would face and not only exist but succeed with such transgressiveness in a conservative setting. Early in her career, Parton used a self-deprecating sense of humor to help neutralize some of the criticism she faced. She took "fake 'caught in bed with'-photos with Burt Reynolds (her co-actor in the [1982 film] *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*)" and often made fun of her own body, especially her bust, during widely watched interviews on late night shows.[91]

Parton often utilizes humor as part of her authenticity narrative, having perfected several oft-repeated one-liners that emphasize a narrative not based in pity; in a relatively recent appearance on *The Nate Berkus Show,* Parton joked about how "[Her family] didn't have any electricity except for the lightning bugs. If fireflies were out, we'd catch them in a mason jar and put them in our bedroom!"[92] This application of humor in conjunction with her "white trash" inspired aesthetics allowed her to create a layer of harmlessness that contributed to her gender performance and facilitated her viability as authentic and acceptable. In particular, the "dumb blonde" stereotype is a recurring motif in Parton's career; even one of her earliest songs was titled "Dumb Blonde." The use of humor also helped cement her hyperfemininity as a performance of gender. By joking about the very traits that she uses for this performance like her bust with one of her trademark jokes, "It takes a lot of money to look this cheap," she helps to "frame her own gender performance as being highly staged."[93]

Humor has also been a consistent element of camp and drag performances, part of the gendered performance is an acknowledgment of its mockery, however subtle that may be. Building the already strong connection between Parton and drag queens, is how many queens

[91] Myhre, "Shades of Pink," 49.
[92] Hoppe, "Icon and Identity: Dolly Parton's Hillbilly Appeal," 53.
[93] Edwards, *Dolly Parton,* 27.

also reference their hyperfeminine gender performance as part of the joke, if not the basis of the comedy. As I'll elaborate later in this chapter, Trixie Mattel has a well-known and established career as a drag queen with an emphasis on comedy and music. Perceiving Parton as a drag queen is aided by how her persona/performance contains layers of complexity, it is not just a performance of gender but an act of subversiveness that can impart a queerness through its presence. Parton's use of humor is another tenuous link between her actions, which have a variety of impacts and connections, and an explicitly queer performance.

One of the ways she uses humor is as a reaction to personal questions in interviews. Much like the quote from the *Nate Berkus Show,* when addressing serious issues, she often delivers a "classic Parton riposte" that deflects a full answer while still allowing her to share *an* answer with the audience.[94] This allows her fans to feel as though they do know things about her, but with the subtle caveat that they know what she wants them to know. By repeating similar lines and information over and over again, she cements its status as truth, which contributes to a wholesomeness that is part of her narrative of authenticity.

Beyond personal information, Parton has also used these opportunities to deliver witty quips with embedded feminist values. Though it was subtle, Parton used her own reputation to normalize a deliverance of progressively leaning ideals, and in turn, she made them "much more palatable to Southern women when presented by someone with whom they share the commonality of being a Southern white female..."[95] Much like her characters in *9 to 5* and *Steel Magnolias,* Parton's use of comedy provided a space for Southern white women and, more importantly, also for a general country music audience to feel more comfortable with this encouragement of gendered empowerment.

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[94] Syson, "Becoming Dolly Parton."
[95] Bell, "Dolly Parton and Southern Womanhood," 21.

Adding to the layers of relatability her persona contains is her married status. While Parton has been very open about her childhood and the information associated with her persona, her marriage and "private" life have always been kept just that, exclusively private. By the time Parton really started her career in Nashville, she was already married; from the start the sexualized elements of her persona were offset by the safety of her married status. She didn't have to be entirely perceived as a young and single woman whose confidence in her own sexuality was a threat to the normalized patriarchy, rather her marriage added another layer of defense to her persona. The defense layers of humor and a married status were worked into her persona, helping hone the complex nuances of her overall image while also contributing to the strength of the individual halves, the artificial and the authentic.

Parton's ability to reference just *a* husband was also helpful; not only were details of her day-to-day life kept private but so were any details about her marriage. The public were only fed small and repeated bits of information on her husband, often revolving around his lack of interest in her celebrity status or performances. By keeping her husband close to a blank slate, Parton was able to reference being married while the husband-figure remained generalized. The blank slate allows her fans and the public to fill-in-the-blanks, supporting the personal mythology associated with Dolly Parton the persona.

In a 1978 interview with *Playgirl*, Parton said "When I'm home, of course, I don't wear a wig every day and I wouldn't be wearing rhinestones....but if I was to go out to the grocery store, I'd wear the whole outfit, makeup and all, because I wouldn't want people to see me looking different!"[96] In public, Parton must act in character but her husband remains in the private realm, keeping with him the "real" Dolly and her authentic interior. The mystery this connection builds

[96] Parton, interview with *Playgirl.*

also contributes to the personal mythology that is indispensable to her persona. Additionally, this quote from earlier in her career supports her more recent sentiment of being a "living drag queen."[97] In 1978, Parton acknowledged that who she is at home is not the glamorized image the rest of the world sees but she clarifies that even when embarking on a mundane errand like grocery shopping, she feels it necessary to maintain her persona. She "[doesn't] want people to see [her] looking different!" Expanding on this point, Parton's differentiation between a performance-based drag queen and herself is important because 1) it emphasizes how artificial and constructed her entire image is and 2) it is at the basis of her reasoning for why she performs, she considers it a mode of being and way of life.

Parton's religious beliefs however have not fully remained in the private realm. She has maintained a public devotion to spirituality, adding to her authenticity narrative a consistent message of broadly accepting religion. Even with the release of her more patriotic album, "For God and Country," Parton has more frequently and consistently referenced an accepting perspective on religion. More than maintaining a broad appeal, Parton's beliefs about her "sensuality" as it relates to her religious beliefs also demonstrate the balance between transgressive and acceptable that characterizes her persona. In her autobiography Parton wrote about how she "[realized] that God meant for her to be sensual, [so] Parton is not inhibited from singing a hymn while donning five-inch heels, heavily styled hair, lowcut glitzy dresses, and pushed-up cleavage."[98] Parton's clear religious devotion acts as another feather on the balance of artificial/authentic, exterior/interior, and transgressive/acceptable.

As defined in the introduction, queerness as a concept is rooted in a pointed and intentional transgression. Even that which is not explicitly gay or lesbian can be defined as queer if it pushes

[97] Parton, interview with RuPaul Charles.
[98] Tuttle, "Queering Country Music Autobiography," 74.

against the boundaries of acceptable presentations of gender or sexuality, as both orientation and description. Using this perspective on queerness, it could be read that Parton's intentional sensuality regarding religion and the unusual rhetoric she's maintained on the subject is queer. Her perception of religion and sensuality is queered because it goes against the norm. It is not explicitly about being or characterizing homosexuality, and it's not supposed to be. Queer exists as identity, description, and action; it is also possible to label Parton's views on religion as queer-adjacent at the least, because her associations of sensuality and spirituality are so anti-normative. Returning to camp and performance, Parton's perspective on religion is another supporting beam of how her overall gendered image and utilization of camp can contain queer elements and maintain a potential to impact queerness via proximity, in this case on a country music setting.

Building on her persona and her careful construction of being artificial and authentic, Parton has shared consistently progressive beliefs throughout her career; however, the directness of how she shared them has changed. In a 1990 interview with *Cineaste*, interviewer Karen Jaehne wrote that "While some might feel the need to address larger political issues from a pedestal of popularity, Parton does not claim the expertise to address any problems beyond the community she now considers home."[99] Much like Parton phrased her religious beliefs to have a broad appeal, the phrasing of her political beliefs was also intentional. Specifically, instead of being perceived as politically minded, she was perceived as "caring about her community." Especially in the late 1980s and 1990s, this intentional rephrasing to focus on "caring" allowed Parton to share more progressive beliefs on class and gender in the country music sphere without overly upsetting the established conservative norm. By the end of the 1990s and into the 2000s, Parton's

[99] Jaehne, "CEO and Cinderella: An Interview with Dolly Parton," 18.

well-established beliefs were deemed acceptable because she had intentionally crafted it to be perceived as "caring" instead of "politically correct" and then shunned or criticized for it.

The perception of her phrasing also supported both halves of her persona, the artificial and authentic. It worked with her hyperfeminine image due to the traditional gender association of the feminine with expressed emotions and "active care" for others. While Parton did not have children, she still fostered a maternal reputation through her philanthropy and consistent work in bettering her home region. While the impact of her philanthropy has spread far beyond the physical borders of Eastern Tennessee, it remains the heart of her efforts, centered on the very popular Dollywood theme park. Through the years, the consistent and meaningful focus on her home region has helped Parton solidify her authenticity narrative, acting as constant physical proof of her background and the importance she places on it. Her progressive beliefs are important to her persona because they contribute another layer of nuance to the long list of traits, imagery, and stories that she has maintained uniformly for over fifty years.

Throughout her career, Parton has caused some controversy over her increasingly explicit support of the LGBTQ+ community.[100] A popular and relatively recent quote on this support came from a 2006 promotional interview. Parton had a minor association with the 2005 film, *Transamerica,* as she wrote one song for the soundtrack. The basic premise of the film is relevant as it's about a transgender woman going on a road trip with her long-lost son. In an interview with Peter Cooper for *USA Today*, Parton said "Having a big gay following, I get hate mail and threats… Some people are blind or ignorant, and you can't be that prejudiced and hateful and go through this world and still be happy... It's all right to be who you are."[101] While this interview as a whole is popular, the last line of this quote is often repeated as concise evidence of her support. Regarding

[100] Edwards, *Dolly Parton*.
[101] Parton, interview with Peter Cooper.

her progressiveness, the consistency and source of her beliefs has been an important factor, especially when regarded contextually.

Thirty years ago, Parton was noted for having "crafted her empire within this patriarchal sphere" while maintaining an appeal to different if not "diametrically opposed demographics," all because of her "constructed identity."[102] The empire in question only grew larger in the time since, further cementing her mythologized status. Her persona has been built and maintained for so long, *what* she is doing can matter less than what she's done before, especially when considering the impact of her legacy as a whole. Parton set out to create a persona that allowed her to exist within country music's sphere as herself, or at least the version that she made. With this persona, Parton knew that she would be perceived as a character and thus be allowed a degree of dimensionality that differs from the average person. Her business empire serves as another physical reminder that she is more than a person, perhaps best encapsulated by the consistent popularity of her theme park, Dollywood.

Parton's persistent attention to her own personal mythology, that she intentionally made complex with an artificial/authentic balance, has helped establish a specific precedent regarding exaggerated gender-based personas within country music. This precedent may not automatically make queerness acceptable in mainstream country, but it does not have to, and it can act as a bridge for a queer country space and authentication. Though it may not be regarded as a norm for *any and all* country musicians, Parton's fifty-year-old constructed persona and its various associated elements have earned an accepted credibility and sturdiness that make it ideal for newer artists to utilize in their own endeavors. For queer country music artists in particular, Parton's career-long attention to gender and sexuality have acted as a predecessor, paving a

[102] Jaehne, "CEO and Cinderella: An Interview with Dolly Parton," 19.

rough path for others who desire to challenge norms of gender expression or push further with explicit expressions of queerness. Parton's persona is reliant on a performance of hyperfemininity, one that manifests as both camp-y and postmodern, and in turn emphasizes and enhances the dual nature of her authentic/artificial halves. The effectiveness of authenticity via proximity is a recurring pattern for the explicitly queer country artists that came after her.

Dolly is a Drag Queen (?)

She has an excessively large blonde bouffant wig, heavily applied stage makeup in bright colors, wears sequined and rhinestone-laden clothing that reveals a prominent bust and exaggerated waist; who is this describing? Dolly Parton. But this description could also be applicable to Trixie Mattel and a legion of other drag queens that rely on very similar imagery for their own performance.

Drag as a performance refers to "individuals who perform overexaggerated representations of gender for an audience."[103] I am using the perspective that drag can be a performance medium through which hegemonic understandings of gender are challenged by the self-aware artificiality acknowledged by the performers and audience. Within academia, the discourse on how subversive drag actually is has varied; some scholars posit that drag queens in particular can uphold a gender binary and gendered stereotypes. Carole-Ann Tyler posits that Parton is actually an example of drag as not innately subversive, since it reproduces stereotypes to differentiate themselves as other than in order white, middle-class norms of femininity.[104] Others like Judith Butler argue that drag's subversity is present "to the extent that it reflects on

[103] Dougherty, "Drag Performance and Femininity: Redefining Drag Culture through Identity Performance of Transgender Women Drag Queens," 20.
[104] Tyler, "Boys Will Be Girls: The Politics of Gay Drag," 32.

the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality."[105]

This claim can be complicated in relation to "faux queens" the academic and colloquial term for cisgender, often heterosexual, women who perform exaggerated femininity as an act. Faux queens are defined by how they "share performative codes with gay men and perform them in queer spaces."[106] Jamie Lee Coull's thesis titled "Faux Queens: An Exploration of Gender, Sexuality, and Queerness in Cis-Female Drag Queen Performance" is one of few academic autoethnographic studies on faux queens. In her work she discusses the concept of being "culturally queer" or "heteroqueer." To be culturally queer is to rely on the notion that queer can be more than a label, and that "queer possibilities arise beyond those which relate exclusively to sexual or gender identity."[107] Basic queer theory, as seen in works published by Butler and Kosofsky-Sedgwick, does question queer as *only* a label, and in the introduction, I do essentially define queer as "being against the norm" (simplifying terms).[108] But, I had not considered that queer as a term could be applied and considered appropriate in reference to a sexual or gender identity that is adjacent to the norm.

In her work and through ethnographic research, Coull explores the implications of heterosexual and cisgender women participating in drag culture as faux queens and whether or not that queers them by proximity. From her initial findings, the condition of being culturally queer is enacted by participating in a violation of the norm via performance of exaggerated gender; the act of performance thus queers the participant because of proximity. To be culturally

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[105] Butler, *Bodies That Matter,* 125.
[106] Coull, "Faux Queens: An Exploration of Gender, Sexuality, and Queerness in Cis-Female Drag Queen Performance," 50.
[107] Coull**,** "Faux Queens," 42.
[108] Kosofsky-Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 93.

queer is to be made queer in some degree, or at least lie adjacent to it, because of the proximity and participation in the subversion of drag as a genre.

Parton may "share performative codes with gay men" via her detailed gender performance but she does not "perform them in queer spaces" as faux queens do; this implies that she cannot be labeled a faux queen or a drag queen. But, as I have detailed so far, there are many shared qualities between Parton and drag queens, to the point that it could be justified to label her performance as "culturally queer." And by proximity, the spaces she creates and reside in gain the potential to be queered as well. Even if she is not explicitly and specifically performing drag, it is still an act of transgression that holds weight.

In December 2020, one of the most well-known drag queen celebrities, RuPaul Charles (known mononymously as RuPaul), conducted an interview with Dolly Parton for *Marie-Claire* magazine. As they talk about the common trend amongst drag queens to impersonate Parton, she says "See, you're a drag queen. Those are like costumes to you. This is my living self," she said. "I am a living drag queen. You dress up just now and then, but for me, though, I like the wigs and I wear them almost every day."[109]I believe the point that Parton was implying is that her performance is constant in the public eye, and so drag to her was more than performance, it was part of who she was on a fundamental level. However, when you consider this with her established history of constructing a persona, this sentiment was yet another supporting statement that while the person she plays is real, it can also be fake *and* real simultaneously. This also works to demonstrate why a postmodern interpretation of camp works best, as there must be a balance of the real and unreal, as they exist at the same time in the same place, and in this case, on and in the same body.

[109] Parton, interview with RuPaul Charles.

Within queer spaces, drag queens are able to "confound, confuse, and directly challenge commonly held notions about the stability and concrete nature of both gender and sexuality."[110] The challenging of hegemonic gender in drag can be considered an act of subcultural resistance based on the opinion that watching and doing drag can be "far better suited to the project of negotiating, claiming, and articulating an individual or collective queer identity than, say, campaigning for queer- friendly candidates and legislation."[111] This is a controversial opinion, but it expands on the central point: drag can be subversive to a radical degree. This potential holds significant implications for Parton's participation in drag, however indirect it may be. Even if Parton doesn't identify herself as a traditional drag queen, to be a "living drag queen," maintains *at least some* of the subversiveness of the act. Her gender-based performance via her persona and its capacity for a postmodern camp can at least be qualified as "culturally queer." Parton might not intend it fully, but her actions facilitate the queering of 1) her image, 2) the space she occupies, and 3) the legitimacy she holds within country music as a larger genre.

Adding to this, the audience can exist in a queer space or state of being through association, by not only accepting the initial premise that Parton is intentionally constructing gender to an exaggerated degree with the intention of performing, and also by their own participation in watching. Applying this further, I argue that country music spaces already have the potential to be radically queer or queered as they exist now. Instead of, or more importantly than, being accepted by the mainstream country audience and industry, queer country artists can exist within country music in their own space. And I argue that it is not an example of being pushed to the margins, but it can be viewed as combatting country music's historical reputation and adherence to conservative values; if to be queer is to exist as one is unapologetically,

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[110] Hanson, "Duct Tape, Eyeliner, and High Heels: The Reconstruction of Gender and Sexuality in a Drag Show," 1.
[111] Horowitz, "The Trouble with 'Queerness': Drag and the Making of Two Cultures," 4.

intentionally violating gender and sexual norms, it makes sense for explicitly queer country artists to want a space that is queer in itself.

Applying Parton's Legacy: Trixie Mattel

Trixie Mattel, a popular social media personality and drag queen, is one of, if not the only country and folk music artist who performs almost exclusively in drag. In addition to the shared genre, Mattel also favors several of Parton's preferred characteristics of exaggerated gender: huge and stylized wigs, obvious and excessive makeup done in a way to heavily alter physical appearance, a sense of pageantry and costume with a particular fondness for rhinestones and the color pink. Mattel is noteworthy because she demonstrates an example of an explicitly queer country artist who exists within her own conditions without removing her claim to legitimacy and authenticity within *a* country music space, even if it's not necessarily the mainstream country space. Mattel is relevant to Parton because of their shared visual aesthetics and genre fluidity that challenges what country is on a musical level. Mattel's navigation of country music history is aided by Parton's existence and precedence.

Since 2017, Mattel has released three full albums and several extended plays (EPs). Her first two albums, *Two Birds* and *One Stone,* are considered country-folk, charting on the Billboard Folk albums chart. Her third album *Barbara* is considered electro-folk and is part of her evolving discography and genre preferences. *Barbara*'s B-side is considered closer to Mattel's classic Americana style of her earlier albums; it also happens to feature a cover of Lavender Country's "I Can't Shake the Stranger Out of You", released as "Stranger." After the initial release of the album, Mattel released a cover of "Stranger" featuring Lavender Country's frontman, Patrick Haggerty. In 2019, she was the focus of a documentary titled "Trixie Mattel: Moving Parts"; it was directed by Nick Zeig-Owens and initially premiered at the Tribeca Film

Festival before it was released on video on demand platforms. The documentary is accompanied by a soundtrack EP which features a cover of "Backwoods Barbie" by Dolly Parton.

Mattel is known more for the country-folk and Americana styles of her first two albums; while not technically categorized as country, both are subgenres of the larger country genre. Her shift between country, folk, and Americana is similar to Parton's musical efforts in the 1990s and early 2000s. These efforts are characterized by how "her albums targeted a niche audience that was mobilized by a rejection of mainstream country industry practices, and the Americana movement's embrace of her generated resurgent critical and commercial successes."[112] Maintaining a genre fluidity is not abnormal, especially not when those boundaries are between country, folk, and Americana. Prominent country music historian Bill Malone believes that "placing an artist within the boundaries of Americana versus country music is not necessarily a clear musical proposition."[113]

Mattel still releases music that is country-based but appears to be developing a more detailed and complicated genre fluidity but continues to center her drag persona. This corresponds with an earlier interview she conducted with *Rolling Stone*, where she said "it's not important if you think of Brian or Trixie singing it. It's not really the point because the whole point of Two Birds, One Stone is this is all the same story, whether or not I'm wearing a costume. This is the same person. These are the same jokes about the same person's life, and these are the same songs about me. For the music videos, I thought it was important for people to see me as both and, therefore, see me as neither."[114] Mattel's explanation of existing as both at once but also neither, echoes Parton's own performance/persona. They have both blurred the

[112] Edwards, *Dolly Parton,* 174.
[113] Malone & Laird, *Country Music: USA,* 565.
[114] Mattel, interview with Brittany Spanos.

lines of performance and reality while continuing to violate gender norms with their performance. This echo of a postmodern influence on their particular demonstrations of camp is arguable, but I think it is valid; Mattel and Parton have taken a performance, a challenging of identity to an extensive point.

Furthermore, Mattel utilizes "third person authenticity" to legitimize herself; in this case, using Parton and her legacy as a performance persona has helped Mattel establish herself as a credible country artist and performer. As a drag queen, she has already constructed a clearly defined persona that combines artificiality and authenticity. "Drag queens in the 21st century may be more likely to take on aspects of their off-stage identity into their on-stage performances and vice versa," and this is applicable to Mattel as well.[115] Through her extensive social media presence and status as a reality television personality on a show about drag performance, she has developed a known personality that conveys authenticity; any individual fan can access hundreds of videos of Mattel interacting with others, maintaining a consistency that lends her credibility.

At its core, Parton's elaborate persona is a performance of gender; I interpret it as an example of postmodern camp because of the multiple different dualities it contains at the same time. To maintain an appeal for mainstream country music, Parton has to be authentic and artificial at the same time. She demonstrates a postmodern twist by incorporating her physical body as an element of artifice, making it real and unreal at the same time. Parton also sets a precedent for a more complicated display of camp through her intentionality. In her drag act, Trixie Mattel employs a hyperfemininity that is directly inspired by Parton and maintains the same duality of artificial and authentic.

[115] Dougherty, "Drag Performance and Femininity," 24.

Trixie Mattel's success so far as a drag queen country artist is important because it acts as an indicator that there is an audience within and outside of country music that wants to have an acknowledged space within country music. Parton and her legacy of an artificial/authentic persona has been an ideal predecessor for queer country artists who can recognize the benefits of building a similar narrative. By appealing to the historicized legitimacy of early country music and using the path that Dolly Parton helped shape in conjunction with tools like social media, queer country artists can make a significant impact on the genre by changing the internal and external perception of queerness in country music.

CHAPTER 3: ORVILLE PECK'S DISIDENTIFICATION OF OUTLAW CAMP

"He is covered in tattoos, visible through his open vests. He wears colorful Stetson hats and cowboy boots. His music is replete with whistles and the sound effects of hooves, bullwhips, and gunshots. His lyrics are at once unabashedly mawkish and languorously erotic. He is gay. He is anonymous. He is the messiah of country music, and he goes by Orville Peck,"[116] says Oliver Houyte of *The Dog Door Cultural.* Orville Peck is an emerging country artist, known for his secret identity, uniquely recognizable visual aesthetic, and melancholic crooning. Arguably, Peck may be more known for being an openly gay artist in country music, with lyrical content and music videos reflecting homoromantic notions.

Peck's visual aesthetic is what I refer to as outlaw country camp, a multilayered approach to camp that combines visual signifiers of the American Old West and distinct embellishments such as fringe, studs, leather, and rhinestones on the already well-known and camp-associated Nudie suit style of the 1960s and 1970s. Peck's calling card is his often-fringed mask that perpetually conceals the top portion of his face, supplementing his notoriously private identity. While there is speculation on his birth name, Peck insists that any other information besides what he shares is irrelevant. This air of mysteriousness works in his favor, emphasizing the outlaw country camp-ness that he is known for.

The outlaw cowboy aesthetic is wrapped in layers of meaning, evoking many different images of the American West, most prominently a sense of lawlessness and nomadic lack-of-belonging. It makes sense that queerness and its frequent partner, camp, can intertwine quite seamlessly with this lone figure on the outskirts of society. Gay cowboys have always existed in the homoromantic subtexts of cowboys' lone lives.[117]

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[116] Houyte, "Orville Peck: The Savior of Country Music."
[117] Colucci, "Boots and Saddle: Fantasizing About Orville Peck's Queer Outlaw Country."

Orville Peck's first few official songs were released on streaming platforms in late 2017 and early 2018, but he was virtually unknown until late 2018 into 2019.[118] Peck claims he previously played in punk bands, worked as an actor/dancer, self-identifies as a cowboy, and is older than 20 but younger than 40.[119] Beyond the information he has provided, pointedly identifying himself with other larger-than-life personas in country like Johnny Cash and Dolly Parton, not much else is known about him. Peck has maintained a strong consistency in answers about his identity over the past two years of increasing media coverage.

Due to his hidden identity and efforts he takes to conserve that, anything known about his personality is solely from interviews, fan interactions, and social media posts. Because of his own efforts, Peck was first known to the public as a "Lone Ranger" figure, at first an isolated and desolate cowboy grappling with the queer experience. With his first release in 2019, *Pony,* Peck received many comparisons to Lana Del Rey. His first album was released by SubPop Records, well-known for signing the band Nirvana in the 1990s. On music streaming services, *Pony* is labeled as alternative; the only mentions of country as a genre are from the artist himself.

After the release and relative success of *Pony,* Peck's reputation grew, and not entirely from his own words. In reality, the American collective memory of the cowboy and outlaw figure assisted his persona-building. He didn't have to say much to explain who he was when there was so much pre-existing material that helped construct the image of a lonesome, emotionally charged, solemn figure. Peck's second release in 2020, *Show Pony* showed a development in his image and sound that encompassed an even more camp-y interpretation of the cowboy. He maintained a sense of solemnity, as it was integral to his interpretation of the romanticized figure, but the genre shift to country made a noticeable impact in the overall

[118] Hight, "Not-So-Lone Rangers: Out Country All Year Long."
[119] Suarez, "Orville Peck is a Lone Stranger Singing Country Songs from Behind a Mask."

reception of the album. Over the course of 2021, *Show Pony* was accompanied by the release of several collaborative singles that contributed greatly to Peck's overall popularity, helping him draw more definitive connections with country music as a genre.[120] I will analyze two of these collaborations later in this chapter.

Peck's physical appearance is unhelpfully generic; he is a tall, skinny, white man with tattoos on much of his physical body. The audience has never seen more than half his face, as he almost always dons a signature fringed mask. The lack of physical attributes allows the viewer to latch onto other visual elements, namely his outfits and the accompanying details of his sets or stages. Initially, Peck started with more somber clothing that was still obviously a costume; he was not intending for a sense of reality. But with the release of *Show Pony,* his clothing and accompanying visuals maintained a heightened sense of camp; I argue it is best representative of a postmodern interpretation of camp as a concept. Specifically, Peck's costumery is extremely reminiscent of the Nudie suits of the mid 1900s; a "passion for gaudy, bespangled, and sequined attire began in California when Nudie the Tailor started supplying his unique creations to local musicians."[121]

Known mononymously as Nudie, Nudie Cohn started as a costume designer for Warner Brothers after the first World War. He was initially hired to make costumes for Tex Williams and his band in the late 1940s; after a short period, the costumes Nudie made for other artists became increasingly "more outlandish, with their bright colors, ornate decorations, and fringe." The number of Nudie suits one owned became a measure of success for country musicians.[122] With the turn of the century, Nudie suits became less trendy and by the 1990s, they had come to

[120] Orville Peck released his third album, "Bronco" in April 2022, after this thesis was written.
[121] Malone & Laird, *Country Music: USA,* 238-239.
[122] Malone & Laird, *Country Music: USA,* 238-239.

be more synonymous with camp and extravagant gaudiness.[123] In the roughly two decades since, Nudie suits and other similarly glamorized Western wear have maintained their camp reputation *and* developed a more layered fanbase and reputation. Peck is one of several current artists who use Western-based aesthetics in their costumery, but what differentiates him is his consistency as that is almost all he wears.

In a 2019 article from *The Guardian,* Leonie Cooper writes that "since the March release of his velvety debut album, *Pony*, the pseudonymous, gay singer-songwriter, whose real identity remains a mystery, has become something of a cult figure for the LGBT community and country fans alike."[124] In a brief overview of articles about and interviews with Orville Peck, many describe him as camp, almost all foregoing a specific definition of this descriptor. And so, that begs the question, how is Orville Peck camp and why does that matter?

Defining Camp in Relation to Orville Peck

I formally define camp as a style and practice, something that is inherently politicized through its proximity to queerness, and typically includes a display of exaggerated normative gender. Camp is still connected to and often seen via a use of theatrics and excessively showy materials such as bright colors, sequins, revealing cuts, and of course, rhinestones. I include in my definition that a postmodern influence on camp in the early 2020s context is assisted by the frequent use of disidentification, as elaborated by Jose Esteban Munoz in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics.* Disidentification can be defined as the "marginalized subjects' political and aesthetic appropriation of exclusionary cultural productions for their own world-making ends."[125]

[123] McQuaid, "Style; The Cowboy Couturier."
[124] Cooper, "Interview with Orville Peck."
[125] Horowitz, "The Trouble with "Queerness," 4.

Peck's performance and dedication to outlaw cowboy country camp is an example of camp used as a tool to create a space for visible queerness in country music made viable through a use of disidentification. Peck's outlaw country camp utilizes disidentification by using outlaw and cowboy themed iconography as an expression of queerness. Disidentification facilitates the postmodern separation of historical meaning from Old West aesthetic and what meaning remains is also an example of a postmodern influence, since the cowboy and outlaw mythos are made into something it never was in reality beyond performance, a caricature and compilation of iconography. The intentional attention to a disidentified outlaw/cowboy aesthetic and mythos is an example of camp vis-a-vis an exaggerated masculinity to the point of being unreal, made simultaneously real and reified through a collective reframing of meaning.

Collaborative Singles & Authenticity

As I've explored so far, a queer country music space would not rely on authentication from members of the mainstream country music audience or industry. Rather, it requires a reckoning within a queer space of what country music means and how that can be queered. I identified that negotiations of authenticity that resonate in queer and country music spaces based on historical definitions and precedents is a viable way of doing so. In the last chapter, I discussed Dolly Parton's success at queering country music space via the postmodern camp of her performative persona. Orville Peck is a relative newcomer to the country music scene, and for his own reckoning, he chose to create a disidentity of cowboy/outlaw aesthetics. Additionally, he has also demonstrated a use of Moore's third-person authenticity as a method of validating a queer existence within country music as a whole. Over the course of 2020 and 2021, he has released four singles that support this: "Legends Never Die" with Shania Twain, on his 2020 EP *Show Pony,* a cover of "Jackson" with Trixie Mattel in April 2021, a remix of "Miss

Chatelaine" with k.d. lang in June 2021, and a collaborative cover of "Born This Way" with Lady Gaga in June 2021. I will consider the first and last of these releases, specifically how they demonstrate a third-person authenticity that exists at the intersection of country music and queerness. This intersection is necessary because it is about creating authenticity for Peck in a way that respects the deviancy and uniqueness of the queer experience *and* an acknowledgement of country music history.

In his most recent EP, *Show Pony,* Peck works with renowned country musician Shania Twain on "Legends Never Die." In a review of *Show Pony,* Sean Maunier remarks that "A collaboration between a queer country artist and a gay icon of sorts could have easily leaned into full camp, but instead ends up as a timeless radio-friendly number."[126] "Legends Never Die" is an example of third person authenticity, where Peck's legitimacy as a country music artist is corroborated by Twain's established stardom and acceptance by mainstream country.[127] The effectiveness of this collaboration relies on the visual elements of the music videos and lyrical content *and* the presence of Twain.

The music video for "Legends Never Die" evokes a different aesthetic and sound than Peck usually aims for. Twain's presence and vocals imbue a lightness and distinct campy-ness to the song. It starts with a variety of people sitting in pickup trucks in a drive-in theater as Peck's song "Summertime" plays over their radios. In a lightning-fast reference, the announcer on the radio is voiced by none other than John Waters, a historical icon of camp. Peck is seen on the drive-in theater stage in his customary fringe leather mask and a rainbow flame embroidered Nudie suit as he starts the song with unusually optimistic strumming on his guitar. Then as he opens his mouth to start singing, the camera pans to Twain, who steps off a motorcycle in a full

[126] Maunier, "Show Pony EP Review."
[127] Moore, "Authenticity as Authentication."

body leopard print, gold fringe trimmed suit and steals the intro before he can start. Her bodysuit is complimented by excessive and large gold jewelry, a bedazzled gold cowboy hat, and a gold bolo tie. Beyond the visual imagery, it is the subject of the song that warrants further inspection. The idea of "legends" is nothing new to Peck, deeply invoking not only his outlaw aesthetic but also the deep relevancy of personas to country's relationship with authenticity. In a 2019 interview with *Men's Journal,* Peck said, "It's funny because … I'm not the first masked country artist by any stretch.... Country has a long history of creating legends."[128]

The second single I will consider is the 10th anniversary re-release of Lady Gaga's song "Born This Way." In June 2021, Lady Gaga reissued her album *Born This Way* featuring six new covers by LGBTQ+ artists. One of these covers was a "Country Road" version of "Born This Way" by Orville Peck; this was not a new re-imagining of the song as Gaga had actually written and performed the "Country Road" version ten years ago. There is no music video or official recorded live performances of this version of the song; there are recordings of Peck singing the cover in concert, but these offer little visual details beyond his customary outfit, either a Nudie-suit style ensemble or a white tank top, jeans and bedazzled cowboy hat and boots. For this cover, there are two elements that make it proof of third person authentication. First, that Peck was chosen as a representative of queer country artists to cover a very well-known song by one of the most well-known pop stars of the last two decades is a significant event. Second, is that the song "sounds country" by emulating "his debut album Pony, with reverb-soaked guitars and pedal steel merging to make for a dreamy, starlight atmosphere."[129] With this act, a mega-star of music has validated Peck's queer country existence; this isn't mainstream country and is not

[128] Peck, interview with Crowe.
[129] Freeman, Jon, "Orville Peck Covers Lady Gaga."

trying to be. Instead of Gaga's original "Don't be a drag, just be a queen," the country version of the lyrics is "If we wanna make it country, baby, it's okay."

Two Parts to a Persona

The fact that it was two huge female music stars that he collaborated with is not coincidental. Part of Peck's construction of his persona is a reliance on two different templates and inspirations. The first half of Peck's persona are the leading ladies of country and their influence on his utilization of camp and authenticity; specifically, Tammy Wynette, Reba McEntire, and most important out of any other figure, Dolly Parton. Peck directly references all three artists as inspirations, but Parton is most often cited.[130] In a 2019 interview with Peck for *The Guardian,* Leonie Cooper said, "It was Dolly Parton's rhinestone sparkle and "cheerful girl from the mountains who couldn't catch a break" persona that entranced him the most. "I remember the moment when I realized that she wasn't a character and that she was a person," he laughs. "I kind of thought she was like Pee-wee Herman."[131]

Parton has been a mainstay of female representation in country music since the late 1960s with her debut album *Hello, I'm Dolly*. In Edwards' study, *Dolly Parton: Gender and Country Music,* she notes that, "Parton is instantly recognizable for her big blonde wigs, elaborate makeup that she claims never to remove, five-inch-high heels, long fake nails, plastic surgery breast implants, and custom-made campy outfits."[132] As I outlined in the previous chapter, Parton's persona has been carefully constructed over the several decades of her career. She has intentionally created a gender-based performance that relies on a balance of authenticity and artifice, something queer country artists like Orville Peck can see as a precedent and inspiration.

[130] Peck, interview with Freeman; Peck, interview with Eisenberg; Peck, interview with Crowe.
[131] Peck, interview with Cooper.
[132] Edwards, *Dolly Parton*, 2.

While Parton and Peck differ in *how* they utilize camp as a subversive tool, both do rely on a relationship between authenticity and artifice as it is seen in the relationship between camp and country. Peck's utilization focuses more on a caricatured hypermasculinity seen through the aesthetics of the cowboy outlaw but made queer through its campy-ness.

The other half of his persona is the outlaw, and while part of his sound, this half also accurately reflects his image. As Emily Colucci writes on the camp-inspired website, *filthy dreams,* "Orville Peck is a pseudonym, at once, a fiction and a real performer… for Orville Peck, the imaginary he's engaged with is equally grounded in American mythology: John Wayne, the Lone Ranger, and other numerous rebellious lonesome cowboys roaming the untarnished land of the American West. [This] vision of Americana, naturally, [is] a complete fantasy."[133]Peck himself has identified the outlaw figure as an important part of who he is, meant to reflect a lone figure that lives outside the establishment. Outlaw country became a genre and was popular in the late 1960s and 1970s, reflecting less the common Nashville-style traditional country and focusing in on a lifestyle, and old Western/rock inspired sound.[134] It "became a metaphor for the lifestyle: facing off against the establishment, hiding your contraband from the cops, and touring from town to town as though chased by the law."[135] Popular artists include Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson, but an important contributor to the image of the outlaw was Johnny Cash. Though "his music may not have played a role in the sound of outlaw country, his anti-establishment ethos is something that his outlaw acolytes picked up on from day one."[136] This is something that Peck has similarly utilized, frequently citing Cash as a source of inspiration. In an interview with Garrett Crowe for *Men's Journal*, Peck said "my style draws more from the Lone Ranger, and

[133] Colucci, "Boots and Saddle."
[134] Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*.
[135] Deusner, "What Exactly Makes a Country Outlaw?."
[136] Shelton, "Outlaw Country: How Willie, Waylon and Others Broke Free."

the Western archetype of a cowboy hat and a handkerchief over someone's face...It's the anti-hero, the spaghetti Western character." And when Crowe asked if Peck would classify his own music as outlaw country, he said "I think so. I definitely take a lot of inspiration from the outlaw country tradition—Willie, Waylon, Johnny. The combination of drama and exaggeration and style in tandem with sincerity…That's outlaw country to me."[137]

The outlaw aspect of Peck's persona manifests in lyrical themes and the visual imagery of his music videos and live performances, often described as something like "Western outlaw balladry."[138] Much like Cash himself, deemed "the Man in Black," Peck can just as easily be seen in an all-black leather suit, even if his might be fringe-trimmed, studded and all leather. Cash's bass-baritone country, rock and roll, rockabilly, blues, and gospel bleeds into Peck's sound but it is his role as a cultural icon that matters more.[139]

Making John Wayne Mad: Queer Cowboys & Outlaws

To fully understand Peck's persona, an examination of the cowboy and outlaw as mythical and real figures is necessary. A very prominent and recent cowboy movie is Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain*, based on the short story by Annie Proulx. Starring Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal, this film is about cowboys, but more importantly it is about queer cowboys and their tragic love story. The film has become known for being one of the most recent disruptions of public discourse on the conventions of a Western, specifically "the unreconstructed, heterosexually masculine genre born out of the open space of the American West."[140]The main characters, Ennis and Jack, and their inevitably tragic and unsuccessful love works to "disarticulate the link between normative heterosexuality and the iconic masculinity represented

[137] Peck, interview with Crowe.
[138] Houyte, "Orville Peck: The Savior."
[139] Lynch, "Unconventional Best New Artist Pick,"; Maunier, "Show Pony EP Review,"; Cooper, "Orville Peck."
[140] Mennel, *Queer Cinema: Schoolgirls, Vampires, and Queer Cowboys*, 102

by the figure of the cowboy."[141] This disarticulation is one of, if not the most, important impact that recent representations of queer cowboys have had.

Historically, the cowboy was a folk hero, meant to embody some of the most valued traits of American imagination. This meant an "unrestricted freedom, crafty self-reliance, familiarity with wilderness and horses…"[142] This masculine figure was meant to portray and communicate what an idealized manhood should be. Masculine is the key word, as traits associated with femininity were considered antithetical to the cowboy and his pure masculinity; associations with femininity include queerness as it has been historically reduced to an identification with the other gender.[143] This romanticization and idealization are just that - romance and an ideal. In reality, the homosocial norms of the cowboy's "solitary" life have been historically ignored. However, in very early Westerns, those produced before 1900, the homosocial and homoerotic affection between the cowboy and his partners on the trail is apparent.[144] Queer cowboy scholar Chris Packard suggests that "these unspoken but erotic bonds deserve attention because they suggest the cowboy comunitas is in part organized around same-sex practices or desires. Although a loner, the cowboy is never really alone. His partner always consoles him…"[145]

The cowboy as singer is also not a new image. In 1910, musicologist and folklorist John A. Lomax published the first widely distributed publication, an anthology titled "Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads." In this early anthology, Lomax describes a romanticized image of the cowboy, available even then as "They loved roaming; they loved freedom; … an impulse set their faces from the east, put a tang for roaming in their veins and sent them ever, ever

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[141] Nunn, "He Ain't Wrong, He's Just Different: Willie Nelson's Queer Outlaws," 90.
[142] Packard, *Queer Cowboys*, 3.
[143] Butler, *Bodies That Matter.*
[144] Packard, *Queer Cowboys,* 3.
[145] Packard, *Queer Cowboys,* 12.

westward."[146] According to one of the leading historians of country music, Bill Malone, ""The cowboy contributed nothing to American music."[147] He also notes that the cowboy did contribute details of his aesthetic, namely "the ten-gallon hat, the silver-studded leather wear, the distinctive cut and decoration of clothes and boots."[148] One of the chapters in Malone's seminal work, *Country Music: USA* is titled "The Image of the Cowboy," as he may not believe the cowboy himself has contributed musically, but he has contributed enough culturally to warrant an entire chapter. In this chapter, Malone discusses the Western era of country music, namely the first half of the 1900s. He names Gene Autry as being among the first of many country singers who actively chose Western-wear or cowboy attire.

The disidentification of the cowboy is not as difficult as it may appear to the non-queer individual. The disidentification is most effective with the cognoscenti of the queer community. For them, the cowboy is not the lonesome settler, or the romantic masculine ideal; the queer cowboy can be so far removed from its original context that a "true" and real meaning is irrelevant. The queer cowboy could be considered a postmodern figure, fragmented into pieces that hold no real weight besides the one that the observer imposes.[149] Which is why for the disidentification to work, for the queer cowboy to gain some meaning, he must be actively queered through a process familiar to the queer individual. A postmodern expression of camp is an effective way to do this, which is why Peck has succeeded so relatively quickly, because it is within a queer country music space where they are able to recognize the symbolism of his persona and remove the associations that don't fit with the fictionalization that the camp induces. The queer experience is defined by being, acting, and feeling queer. It can be isolating,

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[146] Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity*, 164.
[147] Malone & Laird, *Country Music: USA*, 152.
[148] Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, 164.
[149] Allan, "The Postmodern Self: A Theoretical Consideration," 4.

emotionally heavy and complicated. The simplicity of a camp-y, made-up, cowboy character who means something so explicitly queer, is appealing.

The disidentification of cowboy aesthetics is not about being a literal cowboy; there are gay and drag rodeos, that have been studied as separate phenomena, especially relevant to the rural queer individual who might be able to participate on a literal level but that is a singular condition. The use of camp-y Western-wear can be connected to gay and drag rodeos but it can also be considered separately, as the Nudie suit that Peck wears is not to literally ride a bull (a common rodeo activity) but perhaps metaphorically that communicates something to those in the queer community that know what they are looking for, ergo why cognoscenti is an applicable term.

There is another element of disidentifying cowboys from their original meaning that holds significant weight; John Wayne is one of the most significant actors associated with the production of American Western-genre material. He has contributed heavily to associations of conservative masculinity and cowboys.[150] Wayne is also notoriously homophobic. On screen he was able to represent an idealized version of men with ruggedly aggressive heterosexual masculinity; he also held similar values in real life, frequently expressing a hatred for the presence of homosexuality in general and especially in Hollywood.[151] John Schlesinger's "Midnight Cowboy" and Andy Warhol's "Lonesome Cowboys" are two early examples of explicitly homoerotic cowboys on film; they could be considered film predecessors for Peck's queer cowboy image. During a Playboy interview in 1971, in response to a question about "Midnight Cowboy," Wayne said, "It's a [perverse] … story about two fags." I would argue that

[150] Le Coney & Trodd, "Reagan's Rainbow Rodeos: Queer Challenges to the Cowboy Dreams of Eighties America," 76.
[151] Packard, *Queer Cowboy,* 166.

the disidentification of cowboy aesthetics is strengthened by this sentiment; knowing that one of the most recognizable images of a "traditional" cowboy would be excessively disgusted by the growing content and desire for queer cowboys, is a validation of its queerness. To be queer is to be deviant, to have some practice or belief or identity that violates the norm, especially gender and sexuality norms. Making John Wayne mad posthumously (and technically only in theory) can be considered a strong confirmation that the disidentity of the queer cowboy is working effectively.

Outlawry & Disidentification of Cowboys

In *Playing it Queer: Popular Music, Identity, and Queer World-Making*, Jodie Taylor says that "queer musicalized activities are seditious, embodying an outlawry mentality. They are provocative, transforming, rebellious, riotous and anarchic; never passive, obedient or contrite."[152] Peck's outlaw country aesthetic combines both "queer musicalized activities" and an "outlawry mentality" and this combination quite deftly demonstrates the relationship between the outlaw cowboy mythos and the queer's experience of marginalization. There is a shared sentiment of aloneness that can be found between both figures, a condition and connection that strengthens the authenticity of Peck's camp aesthetics.

In this extended quote from a *Rolling Stone* article, interviewer Jon Freeman asks, "You sing about the solitude of cowboy life pretty regularly, and there are some parallels between that experience and that of queer folks living in rural areas. There is frequently distance between you and your lovers or other queer folks. It gets lonely." And Peck says in response,

"Dolly Parton, the girl from Tennessee who grew up barefoot fishing on the river and she was bubbly, but she could never catch a break. That's the reality of who Dolly Parton is as a person, but she's also blown that up to a

[152] Taylor, *Playing it Queer*, 218.

performative, over-the-top level. **I grew up feeling like an outsider my whole life…. I've traveled my whole life and never felt settled down, so to me the country-western, over-the-top version of who I am is** like the Lone Ranger, a storybook cowboy who goes around town to town and lives from heartbreak to heartbreak, because that's sadly kind of the reality."[153] (emphasis added)

This quote quite clearly demonstrates how Peck's camp, created via outlaw country aesthetics, and authenticated via his dedicated persona, can directly translate to validating queerness and experiences of marginalized groups through the meaning of the outlaw country mythos. This is at the core of the postmodern interpretation of camp, as the personal connection to the aesthetic and where it is situated within a genre that generally considers queerness as transgressive makes the entire persona and endeavor into a reclamation strategy for a marginalized identity. Munoz's concept of disidentification aligns with this postmodern interpretation of camp as it is about "recycling and rethinking encoded meaning."[154] The process of disidentification is meant to work on and against norms as a transformation that allows the subject to accomplish social agency regardless of oppressive structures. By utilizing a postmodern camp in addition to the disidentification of outlaw cowboy aesthetics, Peck's persona has the potential to work within and outside the sphere of the mainstream cultural system.

Returning to the central question, Orville Peck's camp is manifested through his utilization of outlaw cowboy aesthetics and disidentification; this is significant because the complex relationships that surround him allow him to prioritize style *and* meaning while creating a postmodern interpretation of camp. This manifestation contradicts Sontagian camp, which is defined by pure artifice and cannot be intentional. It is Peck's queerness that enables him to

[153] Peck, interview with Freeman.
[154] Munoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, 31.

negotiate authenticity within country's complex pre-existing structures. Specifically, examining where and how country music as a genre is situated regarding theatricality, the past, and the outlaw mythos allows for a deeper understanding of Peck's subversive queerness and camp. Situating Peck further into this discussion are the two halves of his persona, the leading lady and the outlaw, as they represent in different ways how these elements can be tangentially seen in country music's history.

Popular discourse about camp prioritizes artificiality but incorporating country music and validating it through cowboy outlaw aesthetics causes Peck's persona to be more layered than Sontagian artifice allows for. In *Playing it Queer*, Taylor maintains that "naïve camp necessitates a parodic or perverse perception of something or someone that emphasizes an artificiality passing as natural, in which case the perception debunks the intended seriousness of the object or subject."[155] Relating this to Peck, his location within country music complicates ideas of artificiality and authenticity. Following in the steps of his primary inspiration and icon, Dolly Parton, country derives part of its authenticity from a constructedness, an artificiality that is best seen in the personas that populate country music across subgenres.[156]

Deering-Crosby and Lynn briefly touch on this, explaining that "authentic country music discourse is undoubtedly reliant on the carnivalesque, due to its "nudie suits, big hair, [and] gaudy production numbers "exposing the duality of country music discourse as natural, simple, and moral while also containing hyperbolic artifice, latent sexuality, and camp pageantry." Parton's work is especially relevant as she demonstrates how the binary between

[155] Taylor, *Playing it Queer*, 73.
[156] Peterson, *Creating Country Music*.

authentic/artifice, or pure/manufactured might be dissolved by claiming both sides, as the artificial campness is rooted in her mountain folk culture.[157]

Country music's authenticity is circular in reasoning, as it is rooted in artifice, and this is continued in the complicated interplay of Peck's layered persona. A notable aspect that should be addressed is the role that the past and nostalgia might play in this relationship. In an article for *Junkee,* Alex Gallagher states that "country…for all its balladeering ... is a genre that indulges theatricality and expression at its core.... the gatekeeping of what country is or isn't fails to justify itself.... subversion is embedded in country music's history."[158] Deering-Crosby and Lynn posit that "country music has a unique cultural quality akin to camp, in which sentimental framing of the past "arouses a necessary sympathy" (Sontag 1964, 8) that is simultaneously natural and constructed."[159]

Country music as a genre promotes theatricality and showmanship via costumery, on-stage theatrics, and especially the creation of personas. In his interview with *The Guardian,* Peck said "The first aspect of country that I fell in love with was that it was so theatrical and bold. Everyone had their brand or their role, like old Hollywood," explains Peck, who connected with the shimmering aesthetic when he was just a kid."

Personas are especially relevant as they demonstrate a reliance on the past for a campy reproduction, but once again Peck's queerness complicates how we can consider his persona as it is situated. In a *Rolling Stone* article, Peck said to interviewer Jon Freeman that "the real me is someone larger than life. I feel like sometimes people interpret what I do as a gimmick or a costume, but the reality is that's just who I am."[160] This insistence that his persona is who he

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[157] Edwards, *Dolly Parton*.
[158] Gallagher, "Orville Peck and Beyond."
[159] Deering-Crosby & Lynn, "Authentic Artifice: Dolly Parton's Negotiations of Sontag's Camp," 52.
[160] Peck, interview with Freeman.

actually is reifies the entire concept. He is Orville Peck because he says so, because his actions reflect this dedication. His artificiality proves his authenticity, and the same can be applied to a variety of country music artists, for example Dolly Parton or Johnny Cash.

In an interview with Sam Damshenas for *Gay Times,* Peck said, "That's a common misconception about me, it's not a character... I'm a cowboy and an outlaw. It's not separate from who I am, it is who I am....It's not me hiding my identity, it's just the aesthetic I display as an artist."[161] Out of over two dozen articles, this is the only interview in which Peck refers to his persona as an aesthetic. This slip of the tongue demonstrates the complicated relationship that Peck maintains with his genre and persona. He challenges dominant ideologies through his existence while preserving a delicate balance in between the complex history behind country and authenticity.

Returning to my central point, Peck interprets authenticity via the cowboy mythos and the postmodern camp of his disidentification of cowboy aesthetics; in other words, this is a complicated process. But his disidentity and practice fit in a queer space, where the postmodern self is the queer self, where one can exist in multiple iterations at once and not be any less real for it; for someone who can call themselves fake but that makes them real at the same time. Orville Peck is a queer cowboy country artist, with a long history and context behind him; he might not be accepted by the mainstream i.e., held in the same regard as Chris Stapleton or Brad Paisley, but he can be accepted by the growing audience and industry within the queer country space.

[161] Peck, interview with Damshenas.

CONCLUSION

When I started the initial outline of my thesis, I believed that practices of postmodern camp via persona construction could lead to the acceptance of queer artists in the mainstream country industry. But as I researched queer theory and read more about academic definitions of queer, I understood that my initial conclusion was contradictory. If queer means against the norm (in the simplest of terms), then why would acceptance by the mainstream matter? The expectations for country music as a genre are expanding and evolving, thus enabling the receiving audience to expand and evolve as well.

In my introduction, I commented on the lack of information regarding queer country music in Bill Malone's pioneering history of country music, *Country Music: USA*. Positively, Malone devotes space in his final chapter to discuss the growing presence of Black artists in country music. Adding to his list, some of the established and rising artists include: Mickey Guyton, Reyna Roberts, Yani, Lil Nas X, Yola, Cowboy Troy, Kane Brown, Amythyst Kiah, Brittney Spencer, Willie Jones, Carolina Chocolate Drops/Rhiannon Giddens, Darius Rucker, Blanco Brown, and Valerie June. This list has been consistently growing over the last two decades, with a recent surge in new artists over the last two years in particular. Despite this growth and the changing status of the country music industry, Black country artists still have to face significant issues from the racism that permeates American society. Malone says that "despite a handful of twenty-first century exceptions … country music artists remain predominantly white, still locked in conceptually to the racialized framework established during the 1920s, at the start of the popular music record industry."[162] As scholars like Diane Pecknold has shown, in an effort to professionalize the genre in the mid-twentieth century, there were

[162] Malone & Laird, *Country Music: USA,* 551.

active efforts to create racial boundaries and enforce segregation between white and black artists. The exclusion of Black artists from the genre is particularly offensive due to the hugely significant impact and role that Black musicians had in developing country as a genre in the early 1900s. In "Redneck Chic: Race and the Country Music Industry in the 1970s," scholar Amanda Marie Martinez draws attention to the Country Music Association's past explicit exclusion of Black artists; they expressly defined their target audience as "middle income, affluent, white, and predominantly conservative," demonstrating a historically cemented shunning of both a Black audience and artists.

Despite this historical precedent and the constant impact of structural white supremacy, "the most significant changes underway in country music and commentary lie in the accelerating recovery and expansion" of Black artists.[163] In June 2020, the Journal of Popular Music Studies published a special edition issue titled "Uncharted Country: New Voices and Perspectives in Country Music Studies," edited by Nadine Hubbs and Francesca Royster. They note that "the changing position of African American voices here intersects with changes in LBGTQ+ and women's positioning in country music and discourse."[164] In the introduction, Hubbs and Royster write about Mickey Guyton, an established Black country artist who had emerged in the mainstream country music scene with her song "What Are You Gonna Tell Her?", a song inspired by her experience as a Black woman in the industry. They note that her song "approaches her socially conscious subject in the time-honored country way: through personal storytelling about individual ordinary lives."[165] Guyton also made an impact with the song she released one week after the police murder of civilian George Floyd, titled "Black Like Me,"

[163] Hubbs & Royster, "Uncharted Country: New Voices and Perspectives in Country Music Studies," 2.
[164] Hubbs & Royster, "Uncharted Country," 2.
[165] Hubbs & Royster, "Uncharted Country," 2.

where, accompanied by a blend of piano, handclaps and pedal steel, she sings in the chorus, "If you think we live in the land of the free/ You should try to be black like me."

Another significant event from the last five years that Malone includes in his history of country music is Beyoncé's 2016 performance with the (Dixie) Chicks at the Country Music Awards. Malone writes about the controversy the mega-star faced for her appearance, performance, and song, namely whether or not it and she could be considered a country artist. Malone notes that "when Lemonade first debuted, commentators weighed in on CMT.com, the Country Music Television website, arguing one way or the other: [did] its acoustic guitar, rhythm, and emotional authenticity qualified it as a solid country song; or, to the contrary, its yeehawin'nods to Texas were only surface-level gestures[?]"[166] In response to the question, Malone does not answer it directly but says, "Beyoncé and the Dixie Chicks together onstage, then, both typifies and exemplifies a twenty-first-century trend of musical cross-pollination and influences blending. On the level of aesthetics, it was an emotionally and artistically genuine performance. Yet, it's no contrived genre mash-up, but a powerful assertion that genre divisions are contrived in the first place."[167] Despite Beyonce's extensive career and well-documented super-star status, even she was subject to intense scrutiny as a Black artist attempting to interact with a genre that has historically rejected them.

For artists like Lil Nas X, Amythyst Kiah, and Yani, they are forced to contend with the double impact of being black and publicly queer. I would like to discuss Lil Nas X's meteoric rise over the last three years, as his music, image, and the public's reception to him are especially relevant to my work. Lil Nas X, stage name for Montero Lamar Hill, shot to fame in early 2019 after the release of his self-made country-rap song "Old Town Road," which would become

[166] Malone & Laird, *Country Music: USA,* 549.
[167] Malone & Laird, *Country Music: USA,* 551.

diamond certified by the end of the year. His debut single featured the artist in a cowboy outfit, riding a horse as he rap-sings about "taking [his] horse to the old town road," and "ride 'til [he] can't no more." He released multiple remixes of the song, but the most popular and played version featured none other than Billy Ray Cyrus, who jumps in with his own rap-style verse. Lil Nas X's debut EP "7" was released in June 2019 and mostly "shied away from the yee-haw flavor of its biggest single," but as music journalist Alex Gallagher notes, "he's largely responsible for the resurgence of interest in cowboy aesthetics within pop culture at the moment."[168] Despite the massive commercial success and huge public reception after going viral, *Billboard* removed the song from its Hot Country songs in March 2019 after claiming it did not "embrace enough elements of today's country music." This decision was met with intense protestations from many in the general public, but to no avail.

Based on the conclusions I've drawn so far regarding third-person authenticity, the existence and popularity of the Billy Ray Cyrus remix should have invoked a sense of legitimacy based on proximity to a well-established and well-known artist. But it did not, and the public discourse surrounding Lil Nas X's eligibility as a country artist strongly suggests that racism was at work to prevent him from being categorized as such.[169] Well-known music journalist Robert Christgau commented, "taking "Old Town Road" off the country chart strikes me as racist pure and simple, because country radio remains racist regardless of the Darius Ruckers and Kane Browns it makes room for."[170] Christgau's comment is seemingly indicative of a deeper critique of country music's treatment of Black artists, despite the relatively recent changes.

[168] Gallagher, "Orville Peck and Beyond."
[169] Gallagher, "Orville Peck and Beyond."
[170] Christgau, "Robert Christgau: Dean of American Rock Critics."

Lil Nas X's viral hit "Old Town Road" is indicative of another relatively recent development in music production and distribution; the Internet and its innovations in global communication has helped contribute to a growing democratization of music production. Lil Nas purchased the beats he used for "Old Town Road" online for $30 from a Dutch DJ. He posted the song to the, still widely popular, short form video sharing app TikTok then supplemented its release with a few short 'TikToks' featuring himself promoting the song. In *Country Music: USA,* Bill Malone remarks on this very concept, adding to country music history a record of the internet's immense impact, saying ""while the airwaves are still relevant, multiple, proliferating platforms across the Internet or via digital satellite signals denote the most distinctive changes for country music in the twenty-first century: seismic shifts in media and multiplication of avenues by which musicians reach audiences." [171] Lil Nas X demonstrates a radical example of this change, specifically by how he as a musician was able to directly communicate with a potential audience, who quickly proved that they are interested in a short country-rap song about a boy and his horse on the road. Malone adds to his previous comment that, "the twenty-first century, however, saw [the previously] predictable relationships between center and periphery [of music] explode."[172]

In her review of queer country music history, music journalist Rachel Cholst commented that "thanks to both the expansion of LGBTQ+ rights and DIY music, queer country is more diverse than ever before."[173] Lil Nas X is an excellent example of the potential appeal and major success that diversity and inclusion can induce. Returning to my thesis conclusions, Lil Nas X is also an excellent example of how a queer country space could form, and via resources like the

[171] Malone & Laird, *Country Music: USA,* 569.
[172] Malone & Laird, *Country Music: USA,* 570.
[173] Cholst, "Lavender Country."

Internet, grow to be actually viable. And in the process of creating this space, a community based on the shared experience of living as a queer person (or as an individual interested in supporting queer people) can meet from all over the world and share in this community-building, regardless of whether said space is primarily virtual. In Judith Butler's 1994 essay, "Against Proper Objects," she says we must try to resist "the institutional domestication" of queer, "for normalizing the queer would be, after all, it's sad finish."[174] In creating an intentionally queer space on a broader level, it runs the risk of succumbing to Butler's described "sad finish" but it also has a potential to be an impactful space that continues the expansion of country music as a genre. Returning to Beyonce, Bill Malone said that "The Recording Academy committee, for its part, excluded "Daddy Lessons" from consideration for Best Country Song in 2016. Yet **neither the Recording Academy nor any other media entity gets to decide what is and what is not country music. Nor can anyone predict the means through which potential fans might find their way to country music in the twenty-first century. No gatekeeper guards the center because there is no center."[175]** (emphasis added) This lack of gatekeeper bodes well for the potential of a subversive space to emerge from what is a historically conservative genre and create a significant impact on country music's future. In the short film documentary about his life, "These C*cksuking Tears," Lavender Country front-man Patrick Haggerty says, "I'm as country as they come, and if you challenge my credentials on my country-ness, you will do so at your peril." Haggerty's sentiment encompasses an attitude queer country artists could heavily benefit from as more musicians learn about the emotional expression that country music can provide, and expression that could reflect their unique identity if they let it.[176]

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[174] Butler, *Bodies That Matter,* 21.
[175] Malone & Laird, *Country Music: USA,* 572.
[176] Haggerty, Patrick (in film).

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